Tessa Henry

Tessa Henry is a graduating senior with a major in History and minors in English and International Studies. Tessa is the president of the Tau Sigma chapter of Phi Alpha Theta. She is also a member of Alpha Chi and Sigma Tau Delta. Tessa has presented at Phi Alpha Theta Nationals as well as regional conferences. She was named the Outstanding Senior for the Oklahoma Christian University History Department, and has retained a 4.0 all four years. Tessa will be attending law school in the fall.

In 2006, Nathaniel Philbrick published *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* as an attempt to wrench the history of the first Plymouth settlers from beneath the veil of mystery and the fabrications of popular culture. As a native New Englander, Philbrick, like most other American children, grew up with the fictitious story of the religious pilgrims with their buckled shoes and their first Thanksgiving with the peaceful feathered Indians. After he earned degrees from Brown University and Duke University, and spent time as a professional sailor in New England, Philbrick decided to take on the huge task of debunking that childhood story and writing an accurate description of the Plymouth colony. Due to his work on *Mayflower*, Philbrick earned a finalist position for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in history and won the Massachusetts book award for nonfiction. Philbrick’s flowing narrative follows the group of unhappy Separatists on their long journey from Jacobean England to the New World and the many toils that followed them all the way up to the utter destruction of King Phillip’s War. In his work, Philbrick depends on many primary sources, such as newspapers, maps, and
personal writings of the Pilgrims, as well as endless secondary writings to defend his arguments and further educate his readers. His thesis argues that the story of the Pilgrims did not end with Thanksgiving, nor was it as simplistic as later New Englanders made it seem; the history of Plymouth is complex, beautiful, interesting, and distressing. In Philbrick’s words, “instead of the story we already know, it becomes the story we need to know” (xii).

*Mayflower* is divided into four main sections of text: Discovery, Accommodation, Community, and War. In the first section, Philbrick deals with the Separatists from Jacobean England and their departure to the religiously tolerant country of Holland. After a short time in Leiden, Holland, the Separatists decided to move once more. After many disappointing negotiations the group eventually boarded the *Speedwell* and sailed to the awaiting *Mayflower* at Southampton where they met Captain Christopher Jones and the “strangers” who would be accompanying them. After several hiccups around the waters of England, and the eventual decision to abandon the *Speedwell*, the group of 102 passengers finally departed on September 6, 1620 from Plymouth harbor. After a long and arduous journey of more than two months, the *Mayflower* landed near Cape Cod and the passengers drafted the Mayflower Compact as an agreement to work together and survive. The Pilgrims eventually settled upon the shores of Plymouth, and soon an Indian named Samoset strode into the diseased and dying settlement and spoke to them in English. He aided the pilgrims and introduced them to another English-speaking Native, Squanto, and the sachem of the Pokanokets (Massasoit). The pilgrims met with the sachem, and the two cultures agreed to live in
peace. Both groups grew optimistic, and later celebrated a Thanksgiving to celebrate health, plenty of food and hopeful times to come.

In the second section, Philbrick explains that the Pilgrims’ close relationship with the Pokanokets caused bitterness among the other tribes of the area. The Pilgrims decided to build a wall to protect their settlement and prevent unwanted Indian visitors. From then on, the relationship between the two cultures became extremely complicated. Following a great deal of tension caused by Squanto’s manipulation, the situation calmed briefly when Massasoit pledged his loyalty to the Pilgrims (due to Edward Winslow saving his life). He maintained close relations with them and began selling them a great deal of land. Unfortunately, the peace was doomed to end when Massasoit died and passed the power of the Pokanokets to his sons. In the third section, Philbrick describes a time of many new settlements in Massachusetts but a decline in the overall spiritual lives of the Plymouth pilgrims. Accompanied by this explosion of settlers, a new era had begun and Massasoit’s sons took control. The sons did not favor the new (and somewhat greedy) generation of Pilgrims as much as their father had favored the original Pilgrims, and they began plans to reclaim their ancestral lands. According to Philbrick, Josiah Winslow (a man unfit for the job) took on the role of attempting to make peace with the new sachem, Alexander. Unfortunately, the situation worsened and the Indians craved war. The conflict reached its peak when John Sassamon, a praying Indian who attempted to warn the English about plans for war, was murdered. The Pilgrims convened a hurried trial and convicted a local native, Tobias, and his accomplices from the report of one eyewitness. The fourth and final section describes Phillip, who came to power after Alexander’s death, and his thirst to create war against the Pilgrims. The terrible situation erupted into
war on June 23, 1675. During the war, most of the Pilgrims did not distinguish between friendly Indians and unfriendly Indians. Benjamin Church stepped forward as a strong commander that could use the Indians to his advantage. He allied with many Indians and fought until Phillip was captured. After the death of Phillip, Indians were taken prisoner and shipped off into slavery. Many of the tribes disappeared, and an estimated 3,000 Indians died in the war (compared with the 600 English).

Philbrick’s description of the founding generation of the Plymouth settlement and their successors remains unlike most others. His narrative provides readers with a realistic picture of Plymouth and how it completely differed from the modern myth of the first Thanksgiving. His extensive use of sources, both primary and secondary, adds to the importance and accuracy of the story. His endnotes are also quite extensive and add a great amount of detail to the story. His specific knowledge of the New England coast, learned from his many sailing adventures, adds a very poetic layer to the text that many historians lack. Rather than simply stating facts, Philbrick provides a geographic landscape to the story of the Pilgrims that he gained from personal experience. In addition to his poetic descriptions, he displays the text in a very simplistic way, but he also creates a flowing narrative that holds the attention of the reader until the very end. One criticism of the book is the somewhat misleading title. Only the first section of the book is spent discussing the Separatists and their difficult journey to reach the Mayflower, and very little is spent discussing the actual journey. A great deal of information about the different ministers, Separatists, cultural differences in Holland, and other details from before the landing on Cape Cod are left to the imagination. Philbrick never specifies whether this is due to his disinterest or simply a lack of helpful sources. In
Henry Mayflower: Courage, Community, and War

reality, most of the book deals with the Plymouth leaders (such as William Bradford, Edward Winslow, Miles Standish, etc.) and the disasters of King Phillip’s War. Although the title could be misleading to some people, the actual purpose of the book is very important. The purpose of the Mayflower is to prove his thesis that the history of the Plymouth colony is not about a turkey dinner, but rather a complicated and multicultural study of human behavior. Rather than placing the Pilgrims on a pedestal as so many have before, or condemning their mistakes, he analyzes the complexity of their relations with the Native Americans. Despite their flight from England, the Pilgrims were never alone or in complete control of their environment. Each choice they made had consequences and had to be carefully thought out in regards to their charter and to the Indians. One tiny drop could create ripples that would tear through their colony. Philbrick treats the Native Americans in the same fashion; they are neither victimized nor made out to be saints. In simplest terms, these opposite cultures clashed and intertwined into a mess of war, betrayal and hope that caused a story like no other. Heroes and frontiersmen, like Benjamin Church, that fought Indians, but respected and adopted the ways of others, emerged from the mess and served as inspiration for the new American identity. Through Church and his “conscience,” Philbrick demonstrates that what Americans ought to know about Plymouth is not the big hats, buckled shoes and feathers, but the creation of the new, individual, and hopeful American identity.