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PLYMOUTH ROCKED

Of Pilgrims, Puritans, and professors.

BY JILL LEPORE

Samuel Eliot Morison, the last Harvard historian to ride a horse to work, liked to canter to Cambridge on his gray gelding, tie it to a tree in the Yard, stuff his saddlebags with papers to grade, and trot back home to his four-story brick house at the foot of Beacon Hill. “Ours was the horsey end of town,” he wrote of the place where he was born, in 1887, and died, in 1976. Morison has been called the greatest American historian of the twentieth century. With that, as these things go, not everyone agrees. He spent nearly all his career at Harvard; he entered as a freshman in 1904, and retired, an endowed professor, in 1955. Summers he spent sailing: he loved nothing so much as the ocean. “My feeling for the sea,” Morison said, “is such that writing about it is about as embarrassing as making a confession of religious faith.”

Morison wrote more than fifty books and won two Pulitzer Prizes, but he is probably best remembered for his biography of Christopher Columbus, whose voyages he retraced, in 1939 and 1940, by yacht. When the resulting book was published, in 1942, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was so impressed that he agreed to allow Morison to join the Navy as what we might now call an “embedded historian”: for the remainder of the Second World War, Lieutenant Commander Morison fought the battles about which he later spent twenty years writing; the result, in fifteen dense, salt-sprayed volumes, was “The History of United States Naval Operations in World War II.” He left the Navy in 1951, a rear admiral.

Besides the sea, Morison wrote about two things especially well: Colonial New England and historical writing. In a 1931 essay called “Those Misunderstood Puritans,” he fought hard against the notion that “the fathers of New England” were “somber kill-joys.” Morison blamed this myth on the Victorians, who cast

the Puritans as prudes in order that they might feel, by comparison, broad-minded. As Morison pointed out, with characteristic clarity, relying on the nineteenth century to understand the seventeenth is a rather grave chronological error. "The right approach to the Puritan founders of New England is historical, by way of the Middle Ages," he explained. "They were, broadly speaking, the Englishmen who had accepted the Reformation without the Renaissance."

Reading Morison, you can almost hear yourself agree with him, even when you don't. That was Morison's gift. Except that it wasn't a gift. Morison cared about writing, evangelically, but he had to work hard at it, and he railed against members of his profession who were unwilling to exert the same effort. In a twenty-five-cent pamphlet, "History as a Literary Art: An Appeal to Young Historians," printed in 1946, Morison complained, "American historians, in their eagerness to present facts and their laudable concern to tell the truth, have neglected the literary aspects of their craft. They have forgotten that there is an art of writing history."

They had forgotten, that is, an American literary tradition begun by "the earliest colonial historians" and, above all, by William Bradford, the governor and first chronicler of the Plymouth plantation. In 1620, Bradford crossed what he called "the vast and furious ocean" on board the Mayflower, a hundred-and-eighty-ton, three-masted, square-rigged merchant vessel, its cramped berths filled with forty other religious dissenters who wanted to separate from the Church of England, and some sixty rather less pious passengers who were in search of nothing so much as adventure. Bradford called these "profane" passengers "Strangers," but to modern sensibilities they can feel more familiar than, say, William Brewster, who brought along a son named Wrestling, short for "wrestling with God."

The colony that William Bradford helped plant on the windswept western shore of Cape Cod Bay was tiny, and it shrank before it grew; by 1650, its population had not yet reached a thousand. Plymouth Colony was Bradford's colony. Between 1621 and 1656, he was elected governor every year but five. Passionate, self-taught, and bold beyond measure, Bradford was the one who called his people Pilgrims. He was also a poet, though not a very good one:

From my years young in days of youth,

God did make known to me his truth,

And call'd me from my native place

For to enjoy the means of grace.

In wilderness he did me guide,

and in strange lands for me provide.

In fears and wants, through weal and woe,

A Pilgrim passed I to and fro.

He wrote his history, he said, "in a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things." He might have been describing how he lived his life. But he was more than plain and simple: he was contemplative. Cotton Mather wrote of him, "He was a person for study as well as action," something that might equally be said of Samuel Eliot Morison, who once, interrupted at his desk by the incessant barking of a neighbor's dog, went outside and shot it.

Bradford began writing his history in 1630, the year the Englishman John Winthrop founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop's colonists are more commonly called Puritans, because they wanted to purify the Anglican Church, but the Pilgrims were Puritans, too—and "nobody more so," as Morison once put it. The distinction between Pilgrims and Puritans is a nineteenth-century invention; in truth, their doctrinal differences were slight. Still, the rivalry between the two colonies was intense, and to Plymouth's disadvantage. By 1641, more than twenty thousand colonists had settled in Massachusetts, entirely dwarfing the "Old Colony." (In 1691, Plymouth became part of Massachusetts.)

Governor Bradford, in other words, had more than barking dogs to distract him: not just Winthrop's colonists, to the north, but Indians everywhere, pigs run amok, and Quakers in Rhode Island taunting ministers in the pulpit. Try

as he might, Bradford just couldn't find the time to catch his past up with his present. He died in 1657, at the age of sixty-seven, his history unfinished. Maybe because Bradford's history ends abruptly, in 1647, most Americans' sense of what happened to the Pilgrims vaguely trails off, too, sometime after Massasoit, a Wampanoag Indian, taught them to plant corn and joined them for the first Thanksgiving, but long before Plymouth and those same Indians went to war. In 1675, Massasoit's son Metacom, called King Philip by the English, launched a war against Plymouth and, eventually, against Massachusetts and Rhode Island and Connecticut, too. The bloody carnage known as King Philip's War nearly put an end to the Puritan experiment.

Nathaniel Philbrick, in his new book, "Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War" (Viking; \$29.95), calls William Bradford's history "the greatest book written in seventeenth-century America." (With that, as these things go, not everyone agrees, but in this case most do.) Despite its title, Philbrick's book isn't really about the Mayflower. Roughly half of it covers Plymouth's history up until about the time of Bradford's death; the other half tells the story of King Philip's War.

Of the Pilgrims' perilous voyage in 1620, Philbrick writes beautifully: "For sixty-five days, the *Mayflower* had blundered her way through storms and headwinds, her bottom a shaggy pelt of seaweed and barnacles, her leaky decks spewing salt water onto her passengers' devoted heads." But the voyage is nearly over by the end of Chapter 1, if not soon enough for Bradford's distressed wife, Dorothy, who had left her three-year-old son behind in Holland and who, in sight of land, fell—or more likely threw herself—over the gunwales, and drowned. And, unfortunately, by the time the Pilgrims go ashore, readers have learned more about things like the Mayflower's sounding leads ("the deep-sea or 'dipsy' lead, which weighed between forty and one hundred pounds and was equipped with 600 feet of line, and the smaller 'hand-lead,' just seven to fourteen pounds with 120 feet of line") than about its passengers' religious convictions ("A Puritan believed that everything happened for a reason"). It's not that the ship doesn't matter. But with every sway and pitch of its decks readers are lulled into believing that the people on board, swaying and pitching in winds we can feel, clutching at ropes we can touch, were just like us. They were not.

Philbrick, a former all-American sailor and Sunfish-racing champion who lives on Nantucket, seems, at first glance, to be following in Morison's wake. Waves slosh through all of his books, whose titles sound like the names of sea chanties: "Sea of Glory," "Away Off Shore," "Second Wind," and "In the Heart of the Sea," the winner of the 2000 National Book Award for nonfiction. Like Morison, he finds most history books written by professors a chore to read. Trained as a journalist, Philbrick once explained his decision to include a bibliographic essay instead of footnotes or references to works of scholarship in his text: "I wanted to remove the scholarly apparatus that so often gets in the way of the plot in academic history."

Sam Morison never met a footnote he didn't like, but his relationship to academic history was a complicated one. At Harvard, he was neither a natural teacher nor a beloved one. He never held office hours, he made his students come to class in coat and tie, and he refused to teach Radcliffe girls (he considered them frivolous). He liked to lecture in riding breeches and, in later years, in his Navy uniform. "Even before he became an admiral, you felt as though he were one and you were a midshipman," a former student, the eminent Yale historian Edmund Morgan, recalled.

But Morison believed, ardently, that there was something about university life that mattered, that made people more honest, more accountable, and less likely to get things wrong. In a 1948 review in the *Atlantic Monthly* of a book by the historian Charles Beard, who had left Columbia thirty years earlier to live on a dairy farm, Morison suggested (pretty cruelly, since Beard was on his deathbed at the time) that Beard's work had suffered from his isolation: "You get more back talk even from freshmen than from milch cows."

Maybe if Nathaniel Philbrick had had to answer to freshmen he might have learned to be a bit more skeptical of his sources. The first half of his book stars William Bradford, and relies, appropriately, on Bradford's history, or, rather, on Samuel Eliot Morison's invaluable edition of Bradford's history. So much did Morison admire Bradford, so much did he despise the myth of the Puritans, so much did he want Americans to read better history, that he spent five years meticulously preparing an edition of Bradford's history "that the ordinary reader might peruse with pleasure as well as profit." Working closely with his faithful secretary, Antha Card, to whom he read Bradford's every word aloud, Morison altered the original's antiquated spelling and cleared the text of notes and scribbles made by everyone from Bradford's biographers to his

descendants, material that had been injudiciously included, and mistakenly attributed to Bradford himself, in earlier printed editions. Morison applied his magnifying glass to every trace of ink on the manuscript's pages. Where earlier copyists had Bradford concluding that "the light here kindled hath shone to many," Morison pointed out that the light actually shone "unto" many; a splotch that looked as though Bradford had crossed out the "un" turned out, on closer inspection, to be "merely an inadvertent blot from the Governor's quill pen." Published in 1952 as "Of Plymouth Plantation," Morison's definitive edition of Bradford is now in its twenty-third printing.

Not long after Bradford's death, Massasoit died, too, and with them ended an era of uneasy peace. Inheriting his father's position in 1662, Philip tried to halt English encroachment. When that failed, he began preparing for war. In January of 1675, a Christian Indian named John Sassamon warned Plymouth's governor, Josiah Winslow, of Philip's plans. Sassamon was soon found dead. In June, Plymouth executed three of Philip's men for Sassamon's murder. Within days, Wampanoags had begun attacking English towns.

In proportion to population, King Philip's War was one of the deadliest wars in American history. More than half of all English settlements in New England were either destroyed or abandoned. Hundreds of colonists were killed. Thousands of Indians died; those who survived, including Philip's nine-year-old son, Massasoit's grandson, were loaded on ships and sold into slavery. Because the conflict was, for both sides, a holy war, it was waged with staggering brutality. New England's Indians fought to take their land back from the Christians, mocking their praying victims: "Where is Your O God?" One, having killed a colonist, stuffed a Bible into his victim's gutted belly. Puritans interpreted such acts as a sign of God's wrath, as punishment for their descent into sinfulness. Not only had they become, over the years, less pious than the first generation of settlers; they had also failed to convert the Indians to Christianity. The Boston minister Increase Mather asked, "Why should we suppose that God is not offended with us, when his displeasure is written, in such visible and bloody Characters?"

Reading those scarlet letters, Puritans concluded that God was commanding them to defeat their "heathen" enemies by any means necessary. For the English, all restraint in war, all notions of "just conduct," applied only to secular warfare; in a holy war, anything goes. Ministers urged their

congregations to “take, kill, burn, sink, destroy all sin and Corruption, &C which are professed enemies to Christ Jesus, and not to pity or spare any of them.” Such a policy, then as now, breeds nothing if not merciless retaliation. As a Boston merchant reported to London, the Indians, in town after town, tortured and mutilated their victims, “either cutting off the Head, ripping open the Belly, or skulping the Head of Skin and Hair, and hanging them up as Trophies; wearing Men’s Fingers as Bracelets about their Necks, and Stripes of their Skins which they dresse for Belts.”

In his recounting of the war, Philbrick places at center stage a militia captain named Benjamin Church. Born in Plymouth in 1639, Church fought in many of the war’s bloodiest engagements. Among them was the “Great Swamp Fight,” in December, 1675, in which English forces killed thousands of Narragansett women, children, and old men hiding in a makeshift fort constructed for their protection in the middle of a Rhode Island swamp. Most died after the English set the fort on fire. (One Boston poet wrote, “Here might be heard an hideous Indian cry, / Of wounded ones who in the wigwams fry.”) In August, 1676, after Philip was shot, it was Church who ordered his body drawn, quartered, and decapitated, whereupon the colony declared a special day to give thanks to God for their signal victory. Philip’s head was placed on top of a stake in the middle of town, where it remained, rotting, for decades.

Philbrick explains the choice of William Bradford and Benjamin Church as his two main characters this way: “Bradford and Church could not have been more different—one was pious and stalwart, the other was audacious and proud—but both wrote revealingly about their lives in the New World. Together, they tell a fifty-six-year intergenerational saga of discovery, accommodation, community, and war.” Here, Philbrick’s “Mayflower” runs aground.

The problem is that Benjamin Church did not write revealingly about his life in the New World. Arguably, he didn’t write about it at all. In 1716, a Boston printer published a book called “Entertaining Passages relating to Philip’s War . . . with some account of the Divine Providence towards Benjamin Church.” The title page lists its author as Church’s forty-two-year-old son, Thomas, who was barely a toddler at the time of the war. In the text, too, Thomas is named as the author, although a brief preface allows that Thomas, in drafting the manuscript, consulted his father’s notes and that the elder Church “had the

perusal of” his son’s manuscript and found “nothing amiss.” And why would he? “Entertaining Passages” paints Church not only as the hero of every battle he fought but as the Puritans’ voice of reason and restraint, as the man of conscience who attempts, in vain, to halt every atrocity: when his Mohegan allies want to torment a captured Nipmuck with fire and knives, Church “interceded and prevailed for his escaping torture”; in the Great Swamp Fight, Church, badly injured, valiantly hobbles to his commanding officer and begs him to stop the attack, only to be rebuffed.

This as-told-to, after-the-fact memoir is the single most unreliable account of one of the most well-documented wars of the Colonial period. More than four hundred letters written by eyewitnesses in 1675 and 1676 survive in New England archives, along with more than twenty printed accounts, written as the war was happening, or very shortly thereafter. But even though “Entertaining Passages” was compiled forty years after King Philip’s War had ended and may well have been entirely written by Church’s son (who, at the very least, edited his father’s “notes” considerably), Philbrick uses it without reservation or caution. Like footnotes, these facts apparently got in the way of Philbrick’s plot. On the second-to-last page of his book, he reluctantly concedes that Church is a “persona,” even as he insists that “Church according to Church is too brave, too cunning, and too good to be true is beside the point.” This is about as reasonable, and as indefensible, as writing a history of the Vietnam War that relies extensively and uncritically on an “autobiography” of John Kerry written in 2013 by Kerry’s daughter Vanessa. As Samuel Eliot Morison liked to say about such things, “Very suspicious!”

If Morison cared about professional standards, he nonetheless held himself well above the academic fray. He was uninterested in historical debates, and hated academic fashions: “Somewhere along the assembly-line of their education, students have had inserted in them a bolt called ‘points of view,’ secured with a nut called ‘trends,’ and they imagine that the historian’s problem is simply to compare points of view and describe trends. It is not.” Although he was elected president of the American Historical Association, and duly served, Morison almost never attended its meetings. When he did show up, he walked through a crowded hotel mezzanine, dazed academics parting before him like the Red Sea. Reaching the end of the room, he turned around, and walked

back, and then back and forth again. A friend came up to him and asked, “Sam, what are you doing?” “Doing?” Morison replied. “*Doing!* Why, what do you think I’m doing? *Mixing!*”

Morison also complained—and the same complaint can be made today—about what he called a “chain reaction of dullness”: professors who write “dull, solid, valuable monographs” train graduate students to write dull, solid, valuable monographs and, before you know it, the only history Americans are reading is written by journalists. Morison didn’t resent this—to the contrary, he urged his students to learn from the best journalists, and the best novelists, too—but it worried him. At one time, he found himself in sympathy with Orwellian calls by members of the American Historical Association to have historians licensed, like doctors, and subject to grand-jury prosecution for “misstatements of the truth.”

History isn’t brain surgery. Even when it’s done poorly, it’s not fatal. Still, it can knock you down. Philbrick rests his argument, or, rather, the arc of his plot, on his reading of Benjamin Church. “The great mystery of this story,” Philbrick writes, “is how America emerged from the terrible darkness of King Philip’s War to become the United States.” The answer? Church. “Out of the annealing flame of one of the most horrendous wars ever fought in North America,” Philbrick writes, “he forged an identity that was part Pilgrim, part mariner, part Indian, and altogether his own.” Church, for Philbrick, is the ur-American, the ancestor of everyone “from Daniel Boone to Davy Crockett to Natty Bumppo to Rambo.” He goes further: by believing that “success in war was about coercion rather than slaughter,” Philbrick argues, Church “anticipated the welcoming, transformative beast that eventually became—once the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were in place—the United States.”

Is this the same Benjamin Church who, the year before he fell off his horse and died, a battle-weary “old soldier,” had his son put together a history recalling his glory days as a reluctant and principled Indian fighter by way of both enhancing his reputation and reconciling himself to a war that many Puritan New Englanders, like him, had since come to feel bad about? In him we see the birth of a nation? The regret, in “Entertaining Passages,” breaks your heart. It was meant to. But it is evidence of remorse, not of restraint (and,

even if it were, what restraint has to do with declaring American independence is bewilderingly unclear). In one chapter, Thomas Church tells the story of his father finding an old Indian man in the woods, after the war's end:

The Captain asked his name, he replied, Conscience. Conscience, said the Captain, smiling, then the war is over; for that was what they were searching for, it being much wanted.

This, of course, is an allegory, not an experience. It is Church, father and son, abdicating the slaughter, four decades after it was all over. It reveals a great deal about how New Englanders remembered the war, but it's about the shoddiest evidence you can think of for telling the story of how they waged it, and a hopelessly leaky boat in which to try to sail to 1776.

Those poor, misunderstood Puritans. Time still moves forward, not backward, and relying on the eighteenth century to understand the seventeenth is still a grave chronological error. "The place of the Pilgrim Fathers in American history can best be stated by a paradox," Morison wrote. "Of slight importance in their own time, they are of great and increasing significance in our time." To them we look, in vain, to see ourselves.

Readers today would find the way that Morison writes about King Philip's War, and especially about Indians, distressing at best. In his 1956 book, "The Story of the Old Colony," Morison boasted, "Whenever there was trouble with the Indians, Plymouth men were up in front, shooting!" But even if he never fathomed New England's Algonquians, and never really tried to, Morison made close study of people like William Bradford, placing him, as best he could, in his proper time and place. In preparing "Of Plymouth Plantation," Morison crafted an edition that would be, as he put it, "modern (*not* modernized)." It would not do, Morison knew, to try to update William Bradford. Better to understand him "by way of the Middle Ages." Morison wrote with grace and eloquence of the vast gulf separating seventeenth-century

New Englanders from himself. “The ways of the puritans are not my ways, and their faith is not my faith,” he confessed. “Nevertheless they appear to me a courageous, humane, brave, and significant people.”

For all his ambivalence about academic history, Morison was first and foremost a scholar. (During one of the nation’s many bouts of anti-intellectual insanity, Morison, of all people, was targeted; in the early fifties, just after he retired from the Navy, he was labelled a “Harvard Red-ucator” and listed among Harvard’s Communist-sympathizing “Egotistical, Arrogant Eggheads.”) Yet, just after Morison’s death, a colleague, Bernard Bailyn, observed, “There is no ‘Morison school.’” Because he wrote more for the public than for his fellow-historians, Morison has few academic disciples today, and, if the chain reaction of dullness continues unbroken, Morison is as much to blame as anybody. But it could be argued that there has been a sea change: there now *is* a School of Morison, a school of history writers who are not professors, not all of whom care as much as Morison did about context and argument and, above all, evidence.

In 1716, Benjamin Church, or at least his son Thomas, looked back at King Philip’s War and decided that it was possible to be both victorious and virtuous in the kind of war the colonists had fought against the Indians—a people at a vast technological disadvantage, fighting a holy war, with almost nothing left to lose. But it wasn’t possible. At least, nothing in the evidence from 1675 and 1676 suggests that it was. And pretending that Benjamin Church found “Conscience” in the woods of Plymouth in that winter of war, rather than understanding why, forty years later, he came to wish he had, doesn’t make it any more possible today. The ways of the Puritans are not our ways, their faith is not our faith. And their wars are not our wars. ♦



since 2005.

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