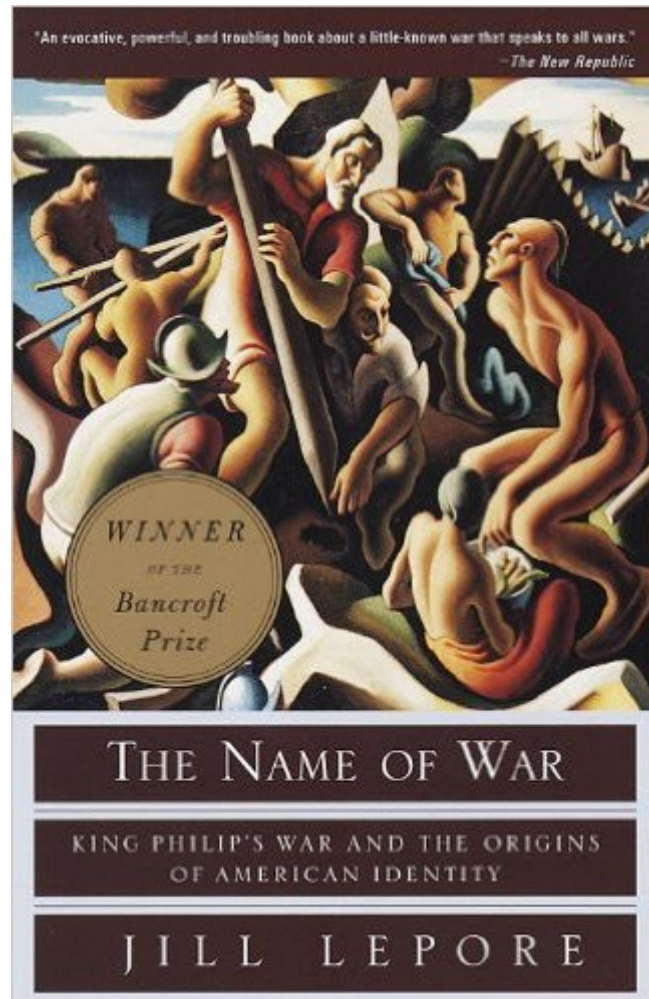


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The Name Of War: King Philip's War And The Origins Of American Identity



Synopsis

Winner of the the 1998 Ralph Waldo Emerson Award of the Phi Beta Kappa Society King Philip's War, the excruciating racial war--colonists against Indians--that erupted in New England in 1675, was, in proportion to population, the bloodiest in American history. Some even argued that the massacres and outrages on both sides were too horrific to "deserve the name of a war." It all began when Philip (called Metacom by his own people), the leader of the Wampanoag Indians, led attacks against English towns in the colony of Plymouth. The war spread quickly, pitting a loose confederation of southeastern Algonquians against a coalition of English colonists. While it raged, colonial armies pursued enemy Indians through the swamps and woods of New England, and Indians attacked English farms and towns from Narragansett Bay to the Connecticut River Valley. Both sides, in fact, had pursued the war seemingly without restraint, killing women and children, torturing captives, and mutilating the dead. The fighting ended after Philip was shot, quartered, and beheaded in August 1676. The war's brutality compelled the colonists to defend themselves against accusations that they had become savages. But Jill Lepore makes clear that it was after the war--and because of it--that the boundaries between cultures, hitherto blurred, turned into rigid ones. King Philip's War became one of the most written-about wars in our history, and Lepore argues that the words strengthened and hardened feelings that, in turn, strengthened and hardened the enmity between Indians and Anglos. She shows how, as late as the nineteenth century, memories of the war were instrumental in justifying Indian removals--and how in our own century that same war has inspired Indian attempts to preserve "Indianness" as fiercely as the early settlers once struggled to preserve their Englishness. Telling the story of what may have been the bitterest of American conflicts, and its reverberations over the centuries, Lepore has enabled us to see how the ways in which we remember past events are as important in their effect on our history as were the events themselves. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Be warned, if you're looking for a history of King Philip's War then this is not the book for you.

Instead what Lepore is investigating is the ways that colonial New Englanders conceived of the war and, by extension their identity. As part of the new wave of cultural history that is coming out of the universities this book represents what is great and frustrating about that movement. On one level the book is, at times, a great look at how early white New Englanders conceived of their identity, the lengths to which they would go to defend this identity, and the ways in which they would justify this defense. Like great cultural history it gives us a vivid peak into the minds of the people it studies, thereby giving us a better understanding of how they thought and lived. On the other hand the book is, at times, frustrating in that it contains elements of the worst aspects of post modern history.

Lepore gets carried away sometimes and lets her study drift too far into the realms of philosophy or literary criticism. Two examples I think illustrate this trend. At one point Lepore spends several pages in a great examination of the contradiction that the colonists felt: on one hand they feared that proximity to the native Americans would turn them into savages, on the other hand if they moved to exterminate the natives then they would lose that quality of justice and mercy that defined them as Englishmen. After laying out this excruciating argument Lepore tritely concludes that the solution to the problem was that the Colonists would wage a war against the natives and then write histories of it that would justify their actions. While this is undoubtedly what happened it doesn't pass muster as a historical solution to the colonists dilemma.

In my last post I described how a short while ago, I decided to do a straight reading up on the history of my country. Not by a series of biographies or of any particular event; but a simple march through the ages exploring all the eras of the United States of America. The first challenge is to find books that try their best to explore from multiple perspectives avoiding just one narrow view, without at the same time surrendering a general narrative that is both readable and enjoyable. The second challenge is determining where to start. I suppose I could start at the American Revolution or all the way back to Mesopotamia. I finally decided to start with A History of England by Clayton and David Roberts. After getting done with the mother county I moved on to this book by Jill Lepore, generally

because of Lepore's reputation of exploring history with memory. Her book deals with early English colonists and how they related to and fought with Native American tribes. Lepore's dealing with both points of view (colonist and Native) during the colonial era surrounding the events leading up to, during, and aftermath of King Phillip's War. Jill Lepore's book is about one of earliest wars in American history and how the conflict would shape the identity of both sides involved. Lepore writes of colonists that left England for the purpose of religious separatism yet are always concerned about losing their Englishness due to the Natives' presence, and also the Native tribes willingness to explore this relationship while it benefited them balanced with their concern about losing their tribal and cultural identity due to the presence of the English.

Three centuries ago, New England Native Americans were forced into war with the English colonists who had been gradually destroying the native economy by stealing their land, interfering with their hunting, fishing, and farming, etc. The resulting war, known as King Philip's War, decimated the English population and very nearly rid New England of whites entirely. English technology and European diseases ultimately won out over the Wampanoags and their allies; there was never again an "Indian threat" in New England. "The Name of War" recounts the struggle as told in English accounts; official documents, diaries, and letters. Author Jill Lepore makes the point that history is always written by the victor. What makes the retelling of King Philip's War so one-sided is the fact that the conquered, the Native American tribes, had no written language in which to tell their side of the story. Very few natives of that time could read or write English and, if they left any accounts of the war, they have never been discovered. Lepore goes on to show that what subsequent generations of Americans thought about the war was based entirely on the writings of the colonists and later, anglo scholars and writers. Their view of the Native American ranged from pagan devil-worshippers, as shown by the Mathers and other early religious leaders, to Noble Savage (Cooper) and finally, Vanishing American (The Curse of Metamora). These attitudes, calcified in books and plays, became the stones upon which later White treatment of Indian nations in other parts of the country were based. The final confrontation at Wounded Knee two hundred years after King Philip's War, had its birth in the earliest chronicles of the seventeenth-century.

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