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Nathaniel Philbrick, *Bunker Hill: A City, a Siege, a Revolution*. New York: Viking, 2013. Pp. xvii, 398. ISBN 978-0-670-02544-2.

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Not the least of bestselling historian Nathaniel Philbrick's achievements in this remarkable book is that, in some three hundred pages on the military campaigns around Boston in 1775-76, he never uses the phrase "shot heard round the world." In his earlier work, too, Philbrick has consistently stripped away accretions of myth from history.<sup>1</sup> He has both a novelist's eye<sup>2</sup> for character and telling detail and a scholar's way with primary documents—letters, diaries, official reports. His latest book is more than a narrow account of a climactic battle; rather, it places Bunker Hill in its wider context as "the critical turning point in the story of how a rebellion born in the streets of Boston became a countrywide war for independence" (xiv).

*Bunker Hill* comprises three sections: the first, "Liberty" (1-105), gives the political background of the rebellion in Boston, especially the events that brought on the British suspension of the Massachusetts government and blockade of Boston in 1774. The second, "Rebellion" (107-230), the heart of the work, recounts the campaigns that began in April 1775 and culminated at Bunker Hill on 17 June 1775. In the third, "The Siege" (235-95), George Washington assumes command of the New England militia, just then dispirited by the death of Joseph Warren, and forces the British to evacuate Boston on 17 March 1776 in the first American victory of the War for Independence.

Avoiding its obligatory mythic elements—embattled farmers, midnight ride, whites of their eyes, etc.—Philbrick brings history to life by concentrating on the characters of Joseph Warren and Thomas Gage, William Molineux and Benjamin Church—their goals and aspirations, the decisions they made, and the actions they took (or not) for better or worse.

Gen. Thomas Gage, commander of British military forces in North America and, after Parliament suspended the Massachusetts government, the province's royal governor, arrived in 1774, charged with pacifying the rebellious colony. By nature a kind and forgiving man, he tried to move the government to Salem, to protect it from political intrigue and Boston mobs. However, "For Gage, the patriots' complaints about British tyranny seemed utterly absurd since British law was what allowed them to work so assiduously at preparing themselves for a revolution. Never before (and perhaps since) had the inhabitants of a city under military occupation enjoyed as much freedom as the patriots of Boston" (79).

His "outsize talent" and "seemingly limitless capacity for work" (110)—i.e., assiduity—made Joseph Warren, a young Roxbury doctor (thirty-four years old in 1775), the leader of both Boston's Committee of Safety and the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, patriot organizations created after the British suspension of the legitimate government. His stubborn sense of patriotic duty put him in the redoubt on Breed's Hill. Philbrick rightly grants Warren first place among Massachusetts leaders, but he does not shy away from exposing the man's strategic or moral lapses. Warren sent two hundred barrels of gunpowder with Benedict Arnold to Ticonderoga, where they were not needed; with that powder, the colonists might have held Breed's Hill in June; and while his fiancée, Mercy Scollay, was raising the widowed Warren's children in the hectic days of April and May 1775, he was tending to a pregnant young woman, the mysterious Sally Edwards, whom he had taken the precaution of sequestering in a Dedham boarding house.

1. In *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (NY: Viking, 2006), he taps primary documents to carry the reader into the world of Pilgrims and Native Americans. In *The Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (NY: Viking, 2000), which won the National Book Award, retells the tragic story that inspired Herman Melville. Philbrick has also written *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (NY: Viking, 2010) and *Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery: The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842* (NY: Viking, 2003).

2. He earned a BA in English at Brown and an MA in American literature at Duke.

While Gage and Warren cannot be faulted for their efforts to forestall rather than provoke violence, Philbrick judiciously assesses their shortcomings as well as strengths. Warren had sent the powder to Ticonderoga; Gage dispatched a combined force of grenadiers and light infantry, who had great difficulty coordinating their actions. Warren's decision to send Paul Revere and William Dawes Jr. to alert the countryside actually violated the tacit understanding the Provincial Congress had reached. But he at least actually made a decision, "something the hypersensitive Gage had been struggling to do now for weeks" (118). Warren emerges, then, as one of the most astute patriot leaders: in the confusion of 1775, "caught in the paroxysms of a revolution even as he searched for his own place in that revolution, [he] had seen the future" (194). Specifically, he grasped the nature of political authority and legitimacy, recognizing that the interests of "the governor and the governed" must be the same in the emerging polity.

These were not abstract questions of political theory in spring and summer 1775. Legitimate government had collapsed, replaced by committees of safety and provincial congresses, though real power rested with the undisciplined and ill-organized militias surrounding Boston. How could "self-created legislative bodies" with "questionable legal authority" (180) control these groups of armed men? Warren's death at Bunker Hill left it to others to grapple with these fundamental questions.

Unlike Warren, George Washington had valuable military experience, most pertinently as a field commander.

Twenty years ago, Washington had experienced firsthand the dangerous volatility of an army made up of citizen soldiers. He knew how bad things could get when all control was lost. A war fought along the lines of what had happened only three months earlier during the British retreat through Menotomy might turn the Revolution into a ferocious orgy of bloodshed out of which America's liberties might never emerge intact. The ultimate aim of an army was, in Washington's view, not to generate violence but to curtail it. (242-43)

Washington was "forced to contend with the confusion and despair that followed Warren's death. [His] ability to gain the confidence of a suspicious, stubborn, and parochial assemblage of New England militiamen marked the advent of a very different kind of leadership. Warren had passionately, often impulsively, tried to control the accelerating cataclysm. Washington would need to master the situation deliberately and—above all—firmly" (xiv).

Philbrick's chapters on the battle itself are captivating. He describes William Howe's preparations to fight using his favorite tactics: attack with a light-infantry charge, draw enemy fire, then charge with bayonets through the smoke before the opponent could reload. The three American commanders—William Prescott, in the Breed's Hill redoubt, John Stark, at the rail fence, and Israel Putnam, nominally in charge at Bunker Hill, disliked each other. As each fought his own battle, the "workings of this strange amalgam of desperation and internal one-upmanship were baffling and a bit bizarre, but as Howe was about to discover, the end result was surprisingly formidable" (215). Howe was unaware that the American commanders were not acting in concert. And, by holding their fire, the patriots thwarted his tactical plan, at least until their ammunition ran out. Of 2200 British soldiers engaged, over a thousand were killed or wounded.

The book begins and ends with John Quincy Adams. On the first page, the seven-year-old Adams looks across "the green islands of Boston harbor" from a Braintree hillside, watching sheets of fire and smoke rise in Charlestown: "the concussion of the great guns burst like bubbles across his tear-streaked face" (xiii). He later learned that Dr. Joseph Warren, the family physician, had died in the battle. Through his long life, Adams thought of Warren every time he picked up a pen, for the doctor's decision to set, not amputate, John Quincy's badly broken index finger preserved his ability to write. Adams reflected on this sixty-eight years later, on 17 June 1843, when he boycotted the dedication of the Bunker Hill Monument. By this time he was, according to a Virginia legislator, "the acutest, the astutest, the archest enemy of Southern slavery that ever existed" (293). Adams wrote in his diary that he could not have borne the sight of orator Daniel Webster "spouting with a Negro holding an umbrella over his head" and the slave-holding President "John Tyler's nose with a shadow outstretching that of the monumental column" without "an unbecoming burst of indignation or of laughter" (293).

In *Bunker Hill: A City, a Siege, a Revolution*, Nathaniel Philbrick has done more than retell a familiar story. He has reminded us once again of its historical meaning and its power to inspire.