

Marlborough Public Library Adult Book Club

November 14, 2023

Travels with George by Nathaniel Philbrick

Thoughts from the author from:

<https://www.boston.com/community/readers-say/2021/12/01/travels-with-george-nathaniel-philbrick-takeaways/>

Philbrick found ‘Travels with George’ to be a much-needed departure from his typical work

“Most of them are straight histories that take me three to four years to research and write,” said the author. “I’m in the archives; I’m in my basement office—which you see behind me—and I don’t get out much (laughs).” Each book for me is a different narrative challenge. And what I really looked forward to was going between my voice with our journey and the more straight history voice with Washington’s journey. The whole book is more informal voice.”

Philbrick became enthralled with George Washington after writing his first book on the American Revolution

“I grew up thinking of George Washington as the dullest thing in history,” said the writer. Yet after completing his first book of three on the Revolution, his opinion changed. Thinking of the moment where Washington arrived after the battle of Bunker Hill, Philbrick saw the leader as aggressive and exciting, a brash individual and savvy politician, yet also a man of great patience. “This is not the George Washington staring at you glumly from the dollar bill. ... We owe the fact that we have a country today to the fact that he was our first president.”

Philbrick believes that learning from history is an important aspect of studying it—and we must acknowledge that there are negatives that often coincide with a historical figure’s achievements

Washington inherited a group of enslaved people at age 11, yet was considered progressive for his time since he agreed to emancipate them upon his death (the only founding father to do so). Yet, Philbrick feels we can’t give him full credit because that raises the question of why he wouldn’t free them sooner if he felt slavery was wrong.

“When it comes to the founding fathers, you have to look at the time in which they operated,” the author said. “It’s very easy now to take what we see as the right thing and judge them for that, and that’s part of what history is about.”

Like Washington’s journey, the book was not always smooth sailing—literally

When Washington finally made it to Rhode Island, he sailed from the temporary capital in New York. Philbrick and his wife, Melissa, decided to honor this leg of the journey by taking their own sailboat to Newport. The couple was sailing through Vineyard Sound when a tornado warning notification flashed on their phones. Minutes later, a thick sheet of rain and heavy gusts of wind that clocked in at 70 knots came down on their ship. The author said it was their scariest 30 minutes together ever and he was glad they left Dora the dog at home for this leg of the journey.