

# Interviews with Nathaniel Philbrick

## The Last Stand

### 1. You're known for books about the ocean and seafaring—why the departure?

Long before I moved to Nantucket Island and began to write about the sea, I was a teenager in landlocked Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who was fascinated by Custer and the West. It was the movie "Little Big Man" that really did it for me, and from the moment I saw that film as a high school freshman, I was hooked. After finishing *Mayflower* in 2006, which ends with the horrifying Native-English conflict of King Philip's War, I decided it was finally time to tackle the battle I'd been thinking about for more than thirty-five years. And besides, I was curious to compare the watery wilderness of the sea with that other wilderness, the West. After four years of research and writing, I've been struck by the remarkable continuities between our country's expansion across the continent and the process by which American sailing vessels ventured out across the oceans of the world. The method by which the Nantucketers of *In the Heart of the Sea* hunted sperm whales was amazingly similar to how the Plains Indians hunted the buffalo; the clashes that occurred between the U.S. Navy's Exploring Expedition of 1838-42 and the Native peoples of Fiji, which I chronicled in *Sea of Glory*, followed pretty much the same pattern as what unfolded between the Seventh Cavalry and Sitting Bull's village of Lakota and Cheyenne. Instead of a departure, this book has felt more like a culmination.

And as it turns out, there is a boat in this most inland of stories: the *Far West*, a 190-foot riverboat that was hired by the U.S. Army to provide Custer's soldiers with provisions and ammunition. After the fighting was over, the *Far West* was loaded with 50 wounded soldiers and a wounded horse named Comanche before it departed on a 500-mile voyage down the Bighorn, Yellowstone, and Missouri rivers to Bismarck, North Dakota, where the first word of the disaster was sent to the East Coast via telegraph. A final Pittsburgh connection: as a kid I used to attend birthday parties on a riverboat replica called the *Good Ship Lollipop*, and during my research for *The Last Stand* it was a great source of pride to learn that not only was the *Far West* built in my native city, her captain Grant Marsh was a Pittsburgher.

### 2. What did you enjoy the most about the research for *The Last Stand*?

In every one of my books I like to get out of the archives and explore, as best I can, the actual places where the history unfolded. Usually when you venture to a historic site, it's a bit of a letdown. A shopping mall or a gift shop has been built across the street. Not in this instance. The Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (LBHBNM) in south central Montana is one of the most hauntingly beautiful and spiritual places I've ever been to. After four visits, which included riding a horse across the battlefield with the Crow tribal member Charlie Real-Bird as my guide, I continue to be in awe of the LBHBNM, which extends for approximately six miles along the Little Bighorn River. I've also visited the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, and the drive out to the site of

Sitting Bull's cabin beside a remote stretch of the Grand River is another trip I'll never forget. The Black Hills—especially Sylvan Lake, where Sitting Bull had a vision of his destiny as his people's leader—was another amazing place. And then there was the week I spent following the path of the Seventh Cavalry during its march from Fort Lincoln near Bismarck, North Dakota, to the site of the battle. It was a more than 300-mile road trip across grasslands, badlands, mountains, and rivers. After that trip, I knew the terrain had to be a major part of the story.

### **3. What surprised you the most as you did your research?**

When I began this book I thought of the battle as an event from a long ago past. I now know that nothing ended at the Little Bighorn. In fact, it sometimes seemed as though the battle was still being fought. When I was doing research at West Point, where Custer finished last in his class just as the Civil War was getting underway, I met with Lieutenant Colonel Peter Kilner at the Center for Company-Level Leaders, who responded to my questions about Custer and the Seventh Cavalry by alluding to what's happening today in Iraq and Afghanistan. When I was in the Black Hills I had lunch with Sitting Bull's great grandson, Ernie LaPointe, a wounded Viet Nam vet who spoke of the stories he'd learned about his great-grandfather as a child growing up on the Pine Ridge Agency near Wounded Knee. I've been in contact with the family of Peter Thompson, a soldier who was awarded the Medal of Honor during the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Thompson's granddaughter allowed me to consult an unpublished manuscript written by her mother in which she reveals that Thompson began recording his experiences soon after the battle. This meant that Thompson's narrative, which was published 38 years after the fighting and has sparked more than its share of controversy, was based on memories that had been put down on paper within months of the fighting. The manuscript convinced me that instead of being dismissed as the hazy recollections of an old man looking back, Thompson's account, in which he claims to have seen Custer on his horse Vic just a half hour or so before his death, must be taken seriously.

### **4. Is there an ultimate hero in your book? Why or why not?**

Heroes are hard to come by in my books. Even the greatest among us is ultimately a human being, and what interests me are the ways in which that humanity expresses itself in times of extraordinary duress. What surprised me in writing *The Last Stand* were the remarkable similarities between Custer and Sitting Bull. They both achieved amazing levels of success, but they also had trouble adapting to the conflicting demands of an ever-changing world.

There is no denying that in the context of the Civil War, Custer was one of the best, if not the best cavalry officers in the Union army. When it came to the Indian wars of the West, however, he had a harder time of it, but so did virtually every army officer. As the military discovered in Vietnam, there is no way to feel good about a conflict in which burning villages of noncombatants is seen as necessary to achieve victory. In leading the attack on Sitting Bull's village, Custer was doing what his superiors expected of him.

For his part, Sitting Bull was in his element during the tense months prior to and during the battle. His charisma, spirituality, and judgment were perfectly suited to the extraordinary challenges faced by his people at that time. However, once

the Lakota were confined to the reservations a new dynamic began to take hold, and Sitting Bull's conviction that he and he alone knew what was best for his people began to rub many of his former followers the wrong way. The reservation's white superintendent did his best to exploit this growing resentment, and in 1890 Sitting Bull was gunned down by the reservation's native police. At one time or another both Custer and Sitting Bull were heroes, but both were also real and vulnerable people for whom the Last Stand was as much a tragedy as a vehicle to eternal fame.

#### **5. Talk a little bit about the media manipulation that both sides engaged in.**

From the first, Custer had a talent for using the media to his advantage. During the Civil War he was handsome, dashing, and young, and being the "boy general" made for excellent newspaper copy. He was also a surprisingly talented writer, and his accounts of his activities in the West did much to recreate his image as America's foremost Indian fighter. But it was Custer's wife Libbie who proved to be the ultimate spin doctor. After her husband's death, she devoted the rest of her long life (she didn't die until the 1930s) making sure her beloved "Autie" was remembered as a Great American Hero.

For his part, Sitting Bull also proved quite adept at using the media to his advantage. After the Battle of the Little Bighorn, he spent several years in Canada, where he gave several newspaper interviews. This was the first tangible information the American people learned about the already famous Lakota chief, and Sitting Bull was careful to emphasize his role as a spiritual leader of his people. During two subsequent tours across the country, one of which was with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, he attracted large crowds everywhere he went. Like Custer, he also had relatives who carefully guarded his legacy after his death. Although the reservation agent at Standing Rock had done his best to denigrate Sitting Bull, his two nephews, One Bull and White Bull, later gave a series of interviews to the writer Stanley Vestal, whose biography, published in the 1930s, portrayed Sitting Bull as a strong and fair-minded leader.

#### **6. Custer seems like a flamboyant blowhard. Are there any redeeming qualities?**

There is no denying that he was an extremely strong personality. People either loved him or they hated him; there was no middle ground. Most of his officers were in the former category but there were two notable exceptions: Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen, who both despised Custer. How this hatred expressed itself during the battle was fascinating to document, and it could be argued that if both Reno and Benteen had followed Custer's orders, the battle would have turned out very differently. Today we tend to think of Custer as this larger-than-life personality who did exactly as he pleased, but that simply was not the case. Instead of a caricature, Custer was a surprisingly complex individual (for example, he was surprisingly well read and his best friend was the Shakespearean actor Lawrence Barrett), and I found him to be endlessly fascinating.

## **7. Was the Last Stand avoidable?**

Absolutely. Although Sitting Bull is often depicted as stubbornly steadfast in his resistance to the American military, he hoped to avoid a conflict at the Little Bighorn. Several Lakota witnesses later insisted that when Reno's battalion first attacked, Sitting Bull instructed his warriors to hold their fire in hopes that the soldiers might be willing to negotiate. When that didn't prove to be the case, the warriors attacked and ultimately defeated the divided portions of the Seventh Cavalry piecemeal.

Over the years, many Americans have looked to the myth of Custer's Last Stand as a kind of inspirational example of how a small band of soldiers fought bravely against a force of overwhelming strength and by fighting to the last man won eternal fame. I would argue that a far better example of leadership in this modern age is provided by Sitting Bull. Instead of recklessly attacking a force of unknown size in hopes that the "shock and awe" of a cavalry charge will achieve victory, it is wiser to do as the Lakota and Cheyenne did at the Little Bighorn: Patiently gather your forces together and, only after every avenue of diplomacy has been exhausted, attack the enemy with everything you've got.

## **8. June 25, 2010, marks the 134 anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. What's the significance of remembering that battle and what will you be doing for it?**

Every year we quite rightly celebrate the Fourth of July. But on June 25, 1876, just as this nation was preparing to celebrate the centennial of its birth, there was the Battle of the Bighorn: an event which demonstrated that even a country with the best of intentions didn't always do the right thing. By remembering the battle, I think we maintain an important perspective on the sometimes troubling reality of America's march across the West.

I'll be spending the 134 anniversary in Hardin, Montana, only a few miles from the battlefield, where I'll be attending a conference about the Battle of the Little Bighorn and its legacy. I've made a lot of good friends during the last four years, and I look forward to seeing many of them in Hardin.

## **Mayflower**

**Q. Your two previous books have been about the sea. *Mayflower*, although it begins with one of the most famous transatlantic voyages of all time, is set primarily on land. Is this book a departure for you?**

A. Less than you might think. One of the themes in both *In the Heart of the Sea* and *Sea of Glory* is that before there was the wilderness of the West in America, there was the wilderness of the sea. *Mayflower* begins with a terrifying two-month passage across the ocean and then segues into an equally harrowing winter amid the wilds of coastal New England. For the Pilgrims, the deprivation, fear, and disorientation of the Atlantic crossing is remarkably similar to what they experienced while attempting to establish a toehold in the New World. Even later in the book, when war breaks out more than a half-century later in 1675, the

two wildernesses continue to mesh and intersect. Some of the most effective soldiers for the English proved to be privateers who transferred their skills as warriors on the high seas to the swamps and forests of New England. In many ways Mayflower is, for me, a kind of culmination rather than a departure: by going to the origins of America, I've attempted to show that much of what we associate with the American West of the nineteenth century was there at the very beginning: a wilderness that included both the ocean and the shore.

**Q. Every child in America learns about the Pilgrims in school. Was it daunting to write a book about a topic that is so well known?**

A. To a certain degree, but I soon began to realize that there was another, virtually unknown story lurking beyond the myth of the Pilgrim Fathers. Most Americans learn about the Mayflower and the Pilgrims, but they know nothing about what happened after the First Thanksgiving. As far as most history curriculums are concerned, the next event of any importance is the American Revolution, 150 years later. Left out of this version of events is the fate of the Indians. The answer is King Philip's War, a conflict that began in 1675 when Massasoit's son Philip decided to go to war. Fourteen months later, more than 5,000 people (in a total population of only 70,000) were dead, more than three-quarters of them Indians. Those of Philip's followers who were not killed were shipped to the Caribbean as slaves. On a per capita basis, more died in King Philip's War than in the American Civil War, and it is a conflict that most Americans know nothing about. I felt that the true legacy of the Mayflower must include this crucial and horrifying event. Instead of being an exception to the subsequent history of our country, the story of Pilgrim Colony foreshadows, to an amazing degree, America's inexorable push west in the nineteenth century.

**Q. So is there any truth at all to the myth of the Pilgrim Fathers?**

A. Sure, but instead of simply being a matter of pious Pilgrims being helped by generous Indians, it is a much more complicated and interesting story. In many ways, it was Massasoit, the leader of the Wampanaogs, who was calling the shots in the beginning. He realized that this desperate group of English settlers might hold the key to rehabilitating his people's fortunes in the wake of a debilitating three-year plague. Not surprisingly, the Pilgrims were slow to understand the intricacies of Native society in the region, especially when it came to the degree to which they were being manipulated by Massasoit. In 1623, Miles Standish—at the behest of Massasoit—led a kind of commando raid against the Massachusetts Indians to the north at Wessagussett. The raid, in which at least half a dozen Indians were killed, threw the Massachusetts, as well as their allies on Cape Cod into turmoil, and Massasoit emerged as a much more powerful leader in the region. In this instance, the Pilgrims had served him well.

**Q. Did the Pilgrims and Indians eat turkeys, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pies at the First Thanksgiving?**

A. Probably yes to turkeys, but no to cranberry sauce and pumpkin pies. Instead of being a largely English celebration with a few curious Indians looking on (as it's usually depicted in elementary school), the First Thanksgiving was an overwhelmingly Native affair. According to contemporary accounts, the Pilgrims

were outnumbered by more than two to one by the Indians; and in addition to turkeys, they ate ducks and venison.

**Q. You focus on William Bradford in the first half of the book. Did anything about the Plymouth governor surprise you?**

A. His ambitions for the colony were much more modest than I had expected. He and his fellow Pilgrims came to America not to start a new nation but to transplant their congregation of English exiles from Leiden, Holland. The Pilgrims were not empire builders; they were deeply religious people who simply wanted to worship God in what they believed was the correct way, and (as the Quakers would later discover) the Pilgrims had no patience with anyone whose beliefs differed from their own. The important thing from Bradford's perspective, was not the issue of religious freedom but that their maintenance of the passionate spiritual bond that they had known in Holland and before that in England. When that passion waned with the second generation, Bradford slipped into an ever darkening despair. He died convinced that his colony had been, from a spiritual perspective, a failure.

**Q. Was Plymouth Colony a failure?**

A. No, not at all. In actuality, the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags achieved remarkable things—for the more than fifty years they maintained peace, an unprecedented accomplishment given the history of the United States. But instead of being characterized by a benign embrace between two cultures, relations between the English and Indians were full of intrigue and wrenching change on both sides. In many ways, New England in the first half century of the seventeenth century—especially after the Puritans arrived in Boston in 1630—was much like the world is today: a place where many competing groups struggled to coexist in a lively, sometimes terrifying process of give and take.

**Q. How is it possible to write fairly about the Native American side of seventeenth-century New England when it was the English who recorded the history of the region?**

A. While it is true that we must rely almost wholly on documents written by the English, it is wrong to assume that there was a monolithic English-Indian divide across New England throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, even during the bloody 14 months of King Philip's War. There were Indians who sided with the colonies and there were English who openly criticized the colonies' treatment of the Indians. Although we will obviously never know as much about the Native point of view as we do the English, it is possible to find testimony that reflects a remarkable diversity of perspectives.

**Q. Given the history of the United States, wasn't King Philip's War inevitable?**

A. It is certainly tempting to see it that way in hindsight, but that is not how most of the people of the time, English and Indian alike, saw it. For them, the war was a terrifying surprise that threw into disarray a bicultural society that had developed over the course of half a century. But once the violence started in Plymouth Colony, it spread with alarming speed across the region. Much as they did in the American Civil War, former neighbors and friends found themselves in brutal conflict.

**Q. Who was at fault in King Philip's War?**

A. I see the outbreak of violence in June 1675 as a failure of leadership on both sides. Philip and Governor Josiah Winslow had an intense personal hatred for one another, and Winslow was loath to open up the lines of communication that might have made peace possible. He had also spearheaded the aggressive series of land purchases that had done much to increase tensions amid the Indians throughout the colony. For his part, Philip had spent the better part of a decade attempting to appease his increasingly belligerent warriors with promises of a war that he had no real intention of fighting. When events took on a momentum of their own after a controversial murder trial involving several of his people, Philip admitted to some of the English with whom he had long been friendly that he had "lost control" of his warriors. Instead of leading his people into battle, Philip was forced to follow the lead of his warriors, with disastrous results.

**Q. You focus on the character of Benjamin Church in the second half of the book, why?**

A. For one thing, he (with the help of his son Thomas) wrote a book about his experiences during King Philip's War; for another, he had a significant impact on the course of the fighting. Even if he didn't win the war singlehandedly (as he comes close to insisting in his narrative), Church had a huge impact on the conflict. Before the outbreak of violence, Church was the only Englishman living in modern Little Compton, Rhode Island, and he came to know the local Indians, led by the female sachem Awashonks, very well. When war erupted, he realized that many Native leaders, including Awashonks, were reluctant to join Philip, and he pled with Governor Winslow and the other colonial leaders to initiate peace negotiations. When this didn't happen and Awashonks and many others were given no choice but to join Philip, he was one of the few Englishmen to insist that instead of viewing all Native Americans as subhuman barbarians, it was in the colonies' best interests to learn as much as possible from the "friend Indians" and to employ them as soldiers. It took a year before the authorities were willing to listen to him, but once he was able to put together his own company of soldiers, made mostly of Awashonks' people, he changed the course of the war. As the outsider who doubts and even mocks the authorities while demonstrating a genuine sympathy for the downtrodden, he anticipates an American type that includes Natty Bumppo, Dirty Harry, and even Rambo. Compared to Bradford and the other Pilgrim Fathers, Church has a strikingly modern sensibility.

**Q. What if Governor Winslow and Philip had managed to avoid war; would American history have been significantly different?**

A. It's impossible to know of course, but it's tempting to wonder whether attitudes toward Native Americans, at least in New England, might have been different at the end of the seventeenth century if there had never been a war of annihilation between the English and the Indians.

## Sea of Glory

**Q. Which aspect of your research did you enjoy the most? Which did you find the most disturbing?**

A. I greatly enjoyed learning about all of the different places the expedition traveled to—from Tahiti to Antarctica to the Columbia River. But researching the culture and history of the American Navy was also fascinating, along with the history of science in the United States. The most disturbing part of the research involved the troubled history of Native-Western interaction in the Pacific. The violence that broke out in Fiji was preceded and followed by plenty of other horrific clashes.

**Q. You wrote a version of *In the Heart of the Sea* for young readers from the viewpoint of Thomas Nickerson, the 14-year-old cabin boy. From whose viewpoint would you choose to retell the events of *Sea of Glory* and why?**

A. I think Charlie Erskine would be the best character to focus on for a children's book. He was just sixteen years old when he first met Wilkes, and would learn how to read and write during the expedition. That he also thought about murdering his commander makes him an especially interesting, and—given Wilkes's tyrannical personality—sympathetic, character.

**Q. *Sea of Glory* is at once scholarly and yet as gripping as the best narrative fiction. How did you manage to balance these two (often contradictory) approaches?**

A. The challenge with this book was the vast scope of the expedition: It lasted for four years, had a cast of hundreds, and there were scene changes every few months. I put a lot of thought into identifying the characters I wanted to focus on; my hope was that their very human story would drive the narrative and provided a needed element of coherence as we followed the expedition around the globe.

**Q. As a very experienced sailor, which of the expedition's (many) sailing mistakes made you cringe the most?**

A. The attempt to sail the *Vincennes* out of the harbor at Pago Pago in Samoa was particularly excruciating. Wilkes's incompetence was almost unbelievable and nearly resulted in the loss of the expedition's flagship—in less than ten knots of wind.

**Q. How has your family's prestigious maritime literary past influenced the way you've approached your own writing?**

A. My father, Thomas Philbrick, is a retired English professor, and in many ways he's been the dissertation adviser I never had. His knowledge of America's maritime history is unparalleled, and he's provided me with critical advice and guidance since I was in high school. My uncle, Charles Philbrick, was a poet with a huge interest in American whaling and exploration, and I've always been extremely aware of following in both of their considerable wakes.

**Q. In the Heart of the Sea and Sea of Glory both focus on leadership gone wrong. Is this a particular interest of yours?**

A. Yes, as a competitive sailboat racer in college and then as a sailing journalist, I was always intrigued by what kinds of personalities were successful on the race course. It wasn't just sailing fast and calling the windshifts; it had a lot to do with how a skipper interacted with his crew. Instead of racing sloops, I've now moved on to whaleships and naval frigates.

**Q. Your writing covers not just the events that inspired him but also many of the same concerns and themes as Melville's fiction. What is your favorite amongst his books, and why?**

A. Moby-Dick is my favorite, but during the research for Sea of Glory I gained a new respect for White-Jacket, the book he wrote prior to his whaling masterpiece. It's based on Melville's brief time serving on a naval vessel. In many ways it's a warm-up for Moby-Dick, but it's fascinating to see him anatomize and poeticize the US Navy.

## In the Heart of the Sea

**Q. Why do you believe the tale of the Essex needed retelling? Why is it important to tell now?**

A. Except for at a few old whaling ports such as Nantucket and New Bedford, the story of the Essex was known, if it was known at all, as the story that inspired the climax of Moby-Dick. It seemed to me that the Essex was something more than the raw material for Melville's miraculous art; it was a survival tale that also happened to be an essential part of American history. Back in the early nineteenth century, America had more frontiers than the West; there was also the sea, and the Nantucket whaleman was the sea-going mountain man of his day, chasing the sperm whale into the distant corners of the Pacific Ocean. Americans today have lost track of the importance the sea had in creating the nation's emerging identity. It wasn't all cowboys and Indians; there was also the whalers and Pacific. More than a decade before the Donner party brought a story of frontier cannibalism to the American public, there was the Essex disaster.

**Q. You brought a historic tale to life with vivid detail and emotional content that rivals narrative fiction. Did it feel like you were writing fiction?**

A. I am trained as a journalist, and instead of inventing anything, the way a fiction writer would, I was trying to figure out, as best I could, what really happened. Where information concerning the Essex and her crew was lacking, I turned to other whaling voyages for examples of what had occurred under similar circumstances. I was very much concerned with the personalities of the men, so I combed documents on Nantucket to help me identify what their backgrounds had been. I looked to modern-day scientific studies in an attempt to figure out what the crew was experiencing, not only in terms of their suffering at sea, but also in terms of the interpersonal dynamics of a survival situation. I

resisted the temptation to create dialogue or presume to know what the men were thinking. On the other hand, I realized that this was an amazing story, and I didn't want my research to interfere with the inherent drama of the tale. I found that if an informational sidebar had its own story to tell, it added to, rather than detracted from, the drama. But I didn't want to litter the book with references to arcane literary and scientific studies. One of the reasons the end note section of the book is so long and detailed is that I wanted to remove the scholarly apparatus that so often gets in the way of the plot in academic history. I wanted to let the story tell itself. If a reader has questions about what sources I used and what decisions I made in crafting the narrative, he or she should refer to the notes.

**Q. What criteria did you use to delineate between reliable and unreliable sources? Who do you feel is a more reliable source, Owen Chase or Thomas Nickerson? Why?**

A. Owen Chase, the first mate, wrote his account of the disaster within months of his rescue, while Thomas Nickerson, the cabin boy, waited half a century before he put pen to paper. Since the normal rule is that the person writing the closest to the actual event is the most trustworthy, that means that Chase's account should be given precedence. However, Chase was an officer attempting to put some very bad decisions in the best possible light. Even though Nickerson was writing decades after the event, he was remembering a traumatic event that had occurred in his teenage years, and psychologists tell us that an older person's memory of such an event is quite reliable. Instead of contradicting Chase, Nickerson adds details that the first mate chose not to reveal. For example, Nickerson reveals that Chase had had an opportunity to lance the whale after the first attack but chose not to. With the help of Nickerson, whose narrative was not discovered until 1980, I aimed to broaden, and in some cases challenge, the received wisdom of Owen Chase.

**Q. Do you think that Captain George Pollard was a poor captain or just unlucky?**

A. Pollard was certainly unlucky, but he also had difficulty asserting his will upon the crew. Pollard was a first-time captain and seemed hesitant to overrule his subordinates. In just about every situation, his instincts were correct, but he inevitably allowed himself to be talked out of his convictions by his two mates, Owen Chase and Matthew Joy. As leadership psychologists will tell you, a leader, particularly in a survival situation, must make decisions firmly and quickly. Pollard was too much of a Hamlet.

**Q. Were you surprised that after the Essex disaster so many of her survivors returned to the sea?**

A. No, I wasn't. On Nantucket in the early nineteenth century a young, ambitious man had few options. If he wasn't going to go whaling, there wasn't much else for him to do. When asked how he could dare go back to sea, Pollard simply said that the lightning never struck in the same place twice. These men had every reason to believe that they had survived the worst that fate could ever throw at them.

**Q. What fascinates you about a survival tale such as this? Why do you think that such true survival tales are so popular today?**

A. A survival tale peels away the niceties and comforts of civilization. Suddenly, all the technology and education in the world means nothing. I think all of us wonder while reading a survival tale, what would I have done in this situation? Would I have made it? There's a part of us that feels our pampered twenty-first-century existence is a kind of lie, I think. We read these stories to experience vicariously the essential truths of life and, of course, death.

**Q. Why do you think, given the fascination the true story of the Essex held for so many, that Herman Melville's novel Moby-Dick failed to garner much attention immediately following its publication?**

A. Part of Melville's problem with Moby-Dick was timing. American popular tastes had shifted. Instead of the wilderness of the sea, Americans were, after the Gold Rush of 1848-49, most interested in the Wild West, and Moby-Dick was published in 1851. The other strike against Moby-Dick was that it was, for the mid-nineteenth century, a very unconventional and challenging novel. For us, it's different. A generation reared on Joyce and Faulkner finds the subtleties and outrages of Moby-Dick a wonderful delight. For readers of Longfellow and Whittier, Melville's novel was very, very strange.

**Q. You say in your Epilogue that the Essex disaster is not a tale of adventure. Can you explain?**

A. To my mind, an adventure is something a person willingly undertakes. Shackleton attempting to traverse Antarctica or Mallory climbing Mt. Everest are adventurers. If they run into troubles, they are, by and large, troubles of their own devising. The crew of the Essex were whalers simply trying to make a living when they were attacked by an 85-foot whale. There was nothing adventurous about the sufferings they subsequently endured. I would certainly call them heroic, but they were not adventurers.

**Q. As a current resident of Nantucket, what do you perceive to be the town's relationship with its whaling history?**

A. Nantucket today has, I think, a somewhat tortured relationship with its past. On one hand, Nantucketers are proud of the island's whaling history; on the other, they care deeply about the marine life they see in the waters surrounding the island. Just last Fourth-of-July weekend a pod of pilot whales beached on the north shore of the island, and Nantucketers worked ceaselessly for an entire day in a vain attempt to save the very same whales their forefathers would have instinctively massacred. Times change.

**Q. What's next for you? Have you plumbed the depths of Nantucket history?**

A. I don't think it's ever possible to plumb the depths of this island's rich history. However, my next book does take me away from the island, even if it is, I think, a natural evolution for a Nantucket historian. It's about the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-42, an unprecedented voyage of discovery by the American Navy that would do for the Pacific Ocean what Lewis and Clark had done for the American West. Following in the whalers' considerable wake, this expedition would chart hundreds of Pacific Islands and bring back so many

scientific specimens that the Smithsonian Institution would be created, in part, to house them. For good measure, this expedition would also venture toward the South Pole and establish for the first time that Antarctica was a continent. Two ships would be lost; dozens of men would never return. It's yet another amazing story of the sea with which modern-day Americans have lost touch.