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Jill Lepore.
The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998. 240 pp.

by
Gretchen A. Adams
University of New Hampshire (USA)

"War is a contest of injuries and interpretation," historian Jill Lepore reminds us, and this claim is at the heart of her study of King Philip's War, which tore apart New England in 1675-76. And it is the words that matter most in this story: the uses of language, the power of speech, and the silencing of voices. As prolific New England colonists memorialized their dead, urged the living to see the ordeal as God's test of their faith and resolve, and tried to rationalize their own ferocity, they not only defeated their Algonquian enemies militarily, but proceeded to silence them in history and in memory. In The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity, Jill Lepore argues persuasively that this struggle for power, land, and authority shaped the very core of what would become American identity.

In June of 1675, a cultural struggle erupted in the wake of the murder of John Sassamon, a Harvard educated minister and Wampanoag Indian who literally embodied the perilous "middle ground" in New England. An example to the English of their civilizing influence and to the Wampanoags of their losses under colonization, his murder (and the subsequent execution of three Wampanoags convicted of the crime) was the catalyst that drove New England to war by late summer. One year later, half New England's towns were in ruins, Philip, the leader of the Indian coalition, lay dead, and the English had very nearly been driven out of New England. Although warfare killed Indian men and subjected elders, women and children of the tribes to decimation, however, the final triumph of the English colonists was in words. After the war, Cotton Mather's removal of the defeated Philip's jawbone from his skull, impaled on the Plymouth palisade, provided a symbol that both he and his audience understood. While the struggle over voices had concluded, the struggle over words began in earnest.

To minister William Hubbard, the conflict was too savage to "deserve the name of a war." It is this definition of the conflict and its participants that is the true subject of Lepore's study; the words the English and then Americans used to describe this almost forgotten war, and how these choices contributed to the shaping of English colonial and later American identity. Lepore reminds us at the outset that the controversy over the name of the war itself still exists. Is it "King Philip's War," or "Metacom's Rebellion"? Is Philip himself "Philip," his baptismal name, or "Metacom," his birth name? Lepore opts for the name (Philip) that the man himself used, rather than the one that very recently has again been misapplied to the man, in an attempt to return some vestige of an Indian perspective. Lepore convincingly argues that the contention about names—now as in the seventeenth century—is symbolic. King Philip's War, by any name, was in the larger sense a "contest for meaning." On this cultural as well as physical frontier, ideology and cosmology clashed. Identities were disrupted, and rather than negotiation and exchange taking place over a safe "middle ground," the New England middle ground was perilous and fraught with internal and external tensions. In fact, Lepore notes, the use of the name "Metacom" first emerged not as a plot by recent multiculturally-minded historians, but with nineteenth-century dramatists who sought a name for the warrior that was "more authentically, and romantically, Indian."

In a brilliant and provocative study that combines the best of old and new methodologies, Lepore delineates the tensions between both groups and the lasting consequences of both the war itself and the histories written about it. It is not only a study of the seventeenth century but of the memory and constructions of identity that formed because of it. Colonists developed a tripartite model that situated competing Europeans and indigenous peoples as very different sorts of "others" that would endure through colonial and national encounters. In a very real sense, as English colonists were trying to define themselves as "English" against Algonquians and other Europeans in the New World, they were, in fact, becoming "Americans."