



Founding Myths

Malcolm X famously said: “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock. The rock was landed on us.” As we approach next year’s 400th anniversary of the landing of the Mayflower in what is now Massachusetts, this dissection of the founding myths of the colonisation of North America is timely. Aside from the actual site of the landing being far from sure, the central myth of the WASP version of history is that the Mayflower carried the Pilgrim Fathers to the New World in search of religious and political freedom.

As the authors point out, this landing was not the first, and was preceded by the slave colony of Jamestown, Virginia. Half of the colonists on the Mayflower didn’t share the Pilgrim Fathers’ puritan views, and the enterprise was financed by the powerful Merchant Adventurers. The Pilgrim Fathers didn’t extend toleration to those of other religious persuasions, and “they had no objection to selling the Indigenous population into slavery”.

The impact of colonisation on indigenous peoples was catastrophic. By 1700, their numbers in the areas first colonised had plummeted by 90%, the result of genocide, disease and forcible removal. A significant proportion of the survivors were enslaved as colonists sought to overcome lack of investment, insufficient settlers and relative weakness compared to Spanish colonies.

The original justification for enslavement and land grabbing was that indigenous peoples lacked the blessings of Christianity. Over time, other more modern reasons were

Richard Price, Leyton and Wanstead CLP, reviews *Telling the Mayflower Story* by Danny Reilly and Steve Cushion, £4 from the Socialist History Society.



cited, including familiar arguments concerning economic freedom and necessity – essentially the same as those used to dispossess the peoples of the Amazon Basin today.

As indigenous peoples began to push back against the steady erosion of their lands, colonists responded with a series of massacres from the 1630s onwards for which they claimed divine sanction. When “God’s Englishman” Oliver Cromwell claimed the backing of providence in his struggle to defeat absolutism, it had a progressive content. Transposed to the New World, the same outlook underwrote the racism of the early colonial project.

Bounties were offered for killing Native Americans and the practice of their religion became punishable by death. Although New England prides itself on its role in the abolitionist movement, its growing textile industry relied on cotton from the south, and established a close relationship with the sugar-producing slave

colonies of the West Indies. While slave-based production never became dominant in the northern colonies, chiefly because of its soil and climate, Boston, Salem and Nantucket became important centres for the import of African slaves, while by 1776 Rhode Island controlled at least two-thirds of the 13 colonies’ slave trade with Africa. New England was “enmeshed in slavery, albeit at arm’s length”. The fate of Native American peoples was drawn out over a long period as settlers pushed west, and in population terms even more catastrophic than that endured by African slaves, culminating in the genocidal “Indian wars” of the nineteenth century.

Telling the Mayflower Story is a valuable synthesis of recent historical research and anti-imperialism that sits alongside Hans Koning’s demolition of the Columbus myth a generation ago in *Columbus: His Enterprise*.