

Clifton Snider, *The Plymouth Papers*, Spouthill Press

Review by Sandra Kolankiewicz

Contemporary Issues Arrived on the Mayflower

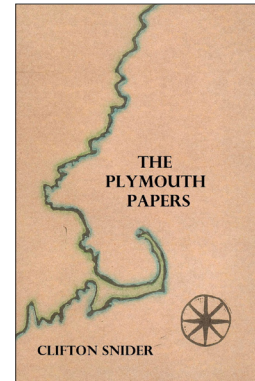
Clifton Snider's *The Plymouth Papers*, published by Spouthill Press, has much to offer readers across a wide spectrum. Readers of historical fiction will be pleased that he has not only created a solidly researched work, but he also has structured his story as a period frame tale—and the tale within the tale is a combination of epistolary writing and journal keeping. The reader follows the narrator's (Caleb Taylor) contemporary life as a man of letters with a publishing house during the Civil War, chronicling the day to day, political, and social issues of his times (for instance, his aunt has become evangelized by a contemporary religious wave sweeping through Boston, and he later laments the death of Hawthorn).

We are also privy to the history, thoughts, regrets, aspirations, and independent opinions of his relatives, whose papers fill an old trunk in Caleb's aunt's attic, materials written by Giles, who records his family's history and his own experiences, beginning in 1617, describing the journey and arrival of his family from England, where his family members and their traveling companions were outsiders in a land where they not only established a colony but also become the judges of other 'outsider' individuals and groups. Over the course of Giles Hopkins's lifetime, we see the arrival of the colonists, their reliance on the Indians, their betrayal of the Indians, and also meet many characters who would fit into any contemporary tale.

Teachers of American Literature will find this a breath of fresh air, offering a counterpoint to the sermons and captivity tales that constitute American Literature before Hawthorn. Sociologists will appreciate the nuances Snider reveals at Giles ponders the various social strata created by both the settlers and the Indians. Gender Studies devotees won't be disappointed either. While I don't want to give too much away, the reader will be pleased that Snider is familiar with the notion of two-spirit people that Native Americans possessed—and which acts as a foil to the gender-bifurcated lives of the first Europeans to arrive and stay.

Snider's understanding of human nature is based in compassion. Even characters who do wrong—except for those who act violently against others with no remorse—are treated kindly and with understanding in this novel. The desperate lives of the women, the precarious nature of a subsistence living, the petty thieving that occurs when people are desperate, the thoughtlessness that righteousness often bestows upon those whose lives make up the dominant discourse—all these shades of humanity are in full view. Likewise are the generous folk across cultures and race whose decency is irreproachable and who serve to remind us of the better parts of our conquering natures.

Little by little Giles transcribes his family history from the old docu-



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ments, including the local history surrounding their arrival in this country, and as he does so, he encounters the full spectrum of humanity, which forces him to reflect on the good and the evil that people do in the name of religion, love, and self-interest. Throughout the novel, the decency of 'every man and woman' is celebrated. One violent act performed out of fear changes the life course of the narrator of the missives and separates him from the ones he loves, yet instead of judging him, we feel his regret.

Clifton Snider has offered up a rare wonder that both delights and instructs. Surrounded by a strident world often willing to make its point by shoving its opinions down the throats of resistant readers, Snider softly and gently introduces us to his characters and his interwoven themes. The book is political without trying to be. He never 'gooses the bishop' to make a point. If you know your early New England history, you will be pleased to see the times reflected accurately and thoughtfully with wonderful descriptions. If you in particular follow American Indian history from that time, you will admire how he weaves the history of the decimation of so many tribes into the family narrative and the daily diary keeping. Throughout the course of the book, as the setting changes from a colony of shacks in the woods to thriving communities with courts, churches, and competing faiths, you will wonder how everyone survived and be reminded of how the unrelenting Puritanism of our early settlers still runs like a thread through our contemporary times.

Most of all, you'll enjoy a good story about believable characters—one which examines the very issues we Americans still struggle with today. Giles Hopkins's confession, in particular, is heart rending, and the narrator of the outer tale, Caleb Taylor, upon reading of his relative's impulsive and tragic act, is forced to ask himself the same questions about his motives for living and his inability to find intimacy with another person—the same questions that so many of us are afraid to ask ourselves now. I recommend this book for book clubs, class rooms, beach reading....and even homophobes. They cannot help but feel compassion for Giles Hopkins's family narrative by the time it ends and will see themselves portrayed with anguished understanding.