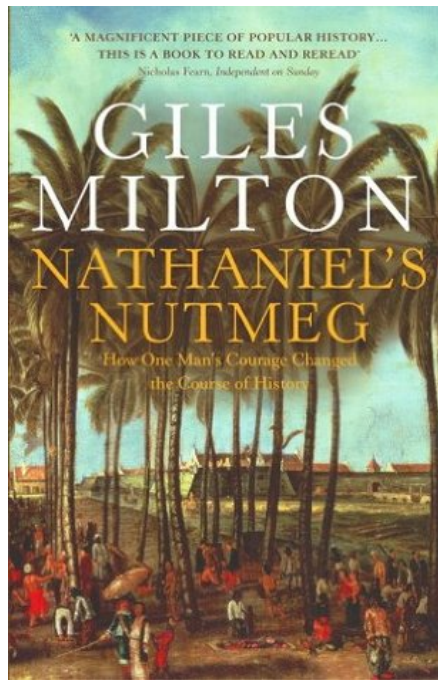




Nathaniel's Nutmeg

Giles Milton

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Nathaniel's Nutmeg Giles Milton

In 1616, an English adventurer, Nathaniel Courthope, stepped ashore on a remote island in the East Indies on a secret mission - to persuade the islanders of Run to grant a monopoly to England over their nutmeg, a fabulously valuable spice in Europe. This infuriated the Dutch, who were determined to control the world's nutmeg supply. For five years Courthope and his band of thirty men were besieged by a force one hundred times greater - and his heroism set in motion the events that led to the founding of the greatest city on earth.

A beautifully told adventure story and a fascinating depiction of exploration in the seventeenth century, NATHANIEL'S NUTMEG sheds a remarkable light on history

Nathaniel's Nutmeg Details

Date : Published April 12th 2012 by Sceptre (first published March 4th 1999)

ISBN : 9781444717716

Author : Giles Milton

Format : ebook 400 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Food and Drink, Food, Travel, Cultural, Asia

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From Reader Review Nathaniel's Nutmeg for online ebook

Libby says

I love to read history. The most wonderful, improbable, intriguing stories are lurking in our history books, if we have the patience and wit to find them. Obviously, I think Giles Milton has found one of those fascinating, obscure true life adventures. Nathaniel Courthope really was an amazing heroic figure that time has consigned to forgotten dusty pages. He and the other swashbuckling characters of the East India trade are all but unknown today, but they swashed their way to creating the greatest Metropolis of our time.

Spice was at the heart of it all. Pepper, cinnamon, mace and nutmeg were worth fortunes in Europe. Control of the spice trade would give any country access to treasure and power. To paraphrase Bedford Forrest, he who got there fustest got the mostest. The Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English were duking it out in the Spice Islands. These tiny specks on the map were vital for only one reason: the most exquisite spices grew there and only there. The resulting wars, raids, atrocities and massacres ended with exhausted diplomats conceding a tiny island called Run to the Dutch and a tiny island called Manhattan to the English. Oh my! Who won and who lost?

This book is very well written. The author has a beautiful style which sweeps along rather like an ice skater; it's so pretty that you forget it's difficult. Naturally I like that a lot. So why, if it's history and it's well written, did I give it only 4 stars? Well, I felt it was a flaw to title the book Nathaniel's Nutmeg and tell so much about others and so little about Nathaniel. I am aware that it is often difficult to document the lives even of very famous persons. I know that aside from his heroic stand on Run, Nathaniel was little known. But I just feel that if he's good enough to make the title, he should not be dealt with in such a perfunctory fashion. I was dissatisfied, almost disgruntled.

I do, however, maintain that this book has a lot to say to us. I am sure it must appeal to history buffs. Foodies should be intrigued by the history of their favorite spices. Adventure lovers should drool over the pirates, crocodiles, cannibals and shipwrecks. So, yes, fellow readers, this one is worth your time.

Picoroco says

What a ridiculous title; very little to do with Nathaniel (Courthope), and the use of the singular nutmeg just grates (if you excuse the pun).

That said, this is an interesting introduction to Western Europe's involvement in the global race to corner the spice market. Particular focus is given to the increasingly bitter and deadly rivalries of the 17th Century English and Dutch spice merchants as they vie for control of the remote archipelagos of Indonesia along with their precious crops of cloves and nutmegs. The Dutch are the eventual winners, but Milton argues that in the long run this was a Pyrrhic victory for the Dutch as they had to sacrifice the bounties of New Amsterdam/York as a consequence.

There is a lot to savour in this book once you look beyond the author's jingoistic spin but as an Irishman it was rather difficult to stomach Milton's portrayal of the English merchants as heroic and honourable opposites of the lawless, villainous Dutch, when he must be fully aware that fellow countrymen of these same 'honourable' merchants were simultaneously laying waste to an island closer to their own shores - but then that island had no valuable spice to offer.

Vanessa says

I do not normally read non-fiction, but my dad shoved this book into my hands after a recent visit and said "Read it" in hushed tones, as if this book contains all the hidden truths I could possibly need.

Written like fiction, it follows the start of the spice trade between Europe and the east Indian islands (Indonesia), the ultimate birth of the East India trading company and the many many battles fought over control over this area between the English, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese.

It took me a while to get into the story, but, once I got past the archaic and sometimes clumsy language, it was a fun read that prompted me to want to know even more about the islands.

I would suggest this book to anyone interested not only in marine history, but also in Pirate lore.

GoldGato says

This was a book that snuck up and surprised me. Reaching into my collection abstractedly, perchance I hit upon this volume. I had no clue about the race for the Spice Islands or just how important spices were to Europe in the 17th century. This book details the history of spices, their importance, their cost, the explorers who dared to find them, and the wars that subsequently developed because of them.

"Have you a great care to receive such nutmegs as be good, for the smallest nutmegs be worth nothing at home."

Book Season = Spring (when the open seas call)

Stefan says

Nathaniel's Nutmeg was a highly readable, interesting, enlightening, and exciting read. It was extremely fascinating to read about the spice race in which a large number of ships and men were lost to war and illness all over a few small isolated and backwater islands in the South Pacific. The interesting stories of forgotten explorers, soldiers, and sailors in their quest to find spices and glory amidst the uncharted vastness of the region was quite amazing. I'd never read a book on this era before, and had never heard about the key individuals in this story. Nor did I know much about the context and history of the spice race. The book's description of forgotten and obscure events during the colonization of the world was astonishing, I'd never read about any of this in my previous readings of History. This book was an eye opener to me, it explored a time period I had never even known about before, and allowed me to get a general and easy to read over view of the key events and context of the time. I thought the early colonization was boring, but Nathaniel's Nutmeg shows that it was both interesting and critically important. Very importantly, this book gave me a interest to read more books about this time period and explore it in greater depth. Highly recommended.

Belinda says

It was an interesting read. As other reviews have mentioned, this is a book one should not judge by their title. (Perhaps a better fit would have been The Dastardly Deeds of the Dutch versus the Entrepid English (pardon the typo, I'm a fan of alliteration)). Anyway, it was interesting. I'd like to think of other adjectives for it, but it was such an overwhelming collection of information. Surprisingly not very optimistic either, with a history of the failures of the English to develop a stronghold in the Spice Islands, and of the Dutch to learn to love...

I liked the pirate-y stories, and some of the tales of individuals were fascinating. However, Milton tries to explain too much in defending his 'thesis' of the importance of Nathaniel Courthorpe and his nutmeg. There were many chapters in the Arctic Circle or West Indies that while loosely related, were distracting from his argument and the rest of the narrative-- they could have been mentioned in a footnote and been just as informative...and saved me from some reading for class.

'Aussie Rick' says

This is an enjoyable book to read, easy to get into and hard to put down. I found the story of the Spice Trade to be quite interesting and that I suppose was a result of the hard work put in by the author. The story was fun, vibrant and quite blood-thirsty and all over a little 'nut'. This is good fun history and the story is well told. Well done to the author!

Silvana says

This book reminds me of Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded by Simon Winchester. An interesting book about something (major) happened in Indonesia but the author decided that the readers will be happy with many side stories that detract from the main topic.

I had the wrong expectation when I bought this book since I was expecting an account of the colonization of Banda Islands and the struggle of the natives. Instead, this book dedicates far more pages for events NOT in Banda but somewhere else like the Mughal Empire in India, Banten, the North Pole, and tons and tons of shipwrecks, dead sailors and other calamities in the vast ocean.

Even Nathaniel himself - the man in the title - was only discussed after around 60% of the book, still with many going off on a tangent afterward. His one-time (!) role as a besieged commander while very heroic and all, was not very instrumental in deciding the fate of the islands. With such a long history during the years of the colonization, everything was decided in the negotiation rooms in London and The Hague and who knows where else. It's not his nutmeg - figuratively and literally - and the author/editor/whoever just did not write a very convincing thesis on why he chose that title.

I think the Banda portion was just okay. As expected, the colonials were cruel (the Dutch even more so, argued Mr. Milton). Combining the forces of paper agreement, guns, ships, and forts, both the English and the Dutch tricked and forced the hands of the natives to sell them monopoly rights for the nutmeg. There were quite lengthy accounts of various fighting between the English and the Dutch over controls of these islands (and some other places including a very long tale about a riot in Java. Some of which involved siege warfare and some crazy torturings (the Dutch were pretty ruthless even to fellow Europeans). Of course, we

are also informed about the killings and slavery of the Bandanese, courtesy of both the VOC and the infamous governor general of the East Indie JP Coen, whose big statue still can found in a big museum in Jakarta instead of being blasted to smithereens for committing genocide.

I wished there were more about the Breda Treaty, where the Dutch traded with the English the island of Manhattan (yes, that one in New York) with Rhun Island. However, it was just a few pages at the end, more like an afterthought.

The author also uses many weird spellings for cities and places. Banten is Bantam, Aceh is Achin, Mollucas is Molucos, Ambon is Amboyna, and he also misspelled Indonesian first vice president name, Hatta became Hatti. Was it so hard to do some research, Mr. Milton? And the boat journey from Neira to Rhun is not treacherous (I've been there using a rickety inter-island transport) since in the ocean, everything depends on the season and tides. I remember a crystal clear water, looks like glass, even.

I want to give this book one star due to those shortcomings but since there are not many books dedicated for this part of Indonesia's history I decided to cut the author some slack. Also, because there were some amusing factoids like this one about Banten: "It was infamous in the East for its loose women and lax morals and an air of profligacy". LOL. Sorry, you'll know why it's funny if you live in Indonesia.

Anyway, this is view of Rhun from a nearby islet: <https://www.instagram.com/p/8Z5YbEiSGX/>
Gorgeous, right? The smell of nutmeg is still there, you know. One can see the nutmeg trees even though there are not as many as they used to be. In front of their houses, the inhabitants spread the fruit's mace to be sun-dried. It was now a sleepy island, forgotten. The people are poor and being so far away from the provincial capital (let alone the country's) does not help with their condition. Tourism is rising but mostly for divers and less for history buffs (except for the laudable Sahabat Museum community who does regular trips there). I sincerely wish more Indonesians want to come there. We need to be constantly reminded that there are some things that should never fade from our memory as a nation, including the blood price we paid and are still paying for being rich with natural resources.

Philip Lane says

I found this very disappointing for two reasons. I had previously read Samurai William which despite its flaws I had much enjoyed and the title and tag on the cover because this book does not live up to its cover. Nathaniel's is a very minor character in the book and Milton's hypothesis that his actions changed the course of history is not properly explored or supported by the book. It is obvious that a lot of research has been done and I did pick up a large number of curious facts and was introduced to a range of amazing characters. However the book lacks focus, it is like a kaleidoscope or a set of pick-up-sticks that have been tossed in the air. I felt that there were at least 5 or 6 good novels in the material or a Hollywood franchise. In essence the book is about the voyages of discovery and trade which set out to profit from the huge demand for spices in Western Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Milton attempts to tell this story through the letters of the sailors and merchants involved in this trade. We get a vivid picture of the hardships and dangers but the wider picture which Milton tries to paint is lost in speculation. Whilst he tries to promote Nathaniel Courthope to national hero status he skates over other more important events and protagonists. I got very irritated.

Sarah says

This is an interesting recount of the history of English trade in the East and their battles with the Netherlands for supremacy over a small group of islands, the Bandas Islands, much coveted for their rich harvest of cloves, mace and nutmeg. Much credit must go to Milton who has managed to piece together this history despite the limited extant historical sources. This battle known as the 'spice race' which began in the late 16th century and lasted throughout the 17th century, as well as being interesting in itself, also sheds light on the story of how Britain came to be involved in India and how New York came to be so named. Oddly enough, despite the piracy and bloodshed and heartache, it took until the 1810's before anyone thought to uproot a plant and transfer it elsewhere. Strange! There was obviously a lot of honour in dying for your nutmeg. Don't be misled by the title, although Nathaniel Courthope has a very significant role to play in this history, he is only in the story for a very short period.

One thing: this book was originally published in 1999, and very matter-of-factly talks about the World Trade Centre. This brought me up short. With a jolt I realised how much more innocent and blissfully ignorant we were only 20 years ago.

Beth Cato says

The title of this is somewhat misleading; it's not simply Nathaniel Courthope's story, but that of various men over a century who fought and died over islands that don't even garner a mention on most contemporary maps.[return][return]The tiny island of Run is in the Indonesian archipelago. Five hundred years ago, that small cluster of volcanic islands was the only place in the world where one could find clove and nutmeg. And everyone wanted it - the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English, though the last two were the greatest foes. In this fascinating story, Milton describes the incredible effort it took to make it to Run and its neighboring islands. Thousands of lives were lost just in the journey. Shipwrecks, dysentery, piracy. Starving sailors would land on islands and gorge on scared cows, only to be slaughtered by mobs of horrified villagers who believed the cows held the spirits of deceased ancestors. When the Dutch finally gained control and brutally subjugated the native population of the islands, the English still persisted in their claim for spices. War ensued. Brutality was undeniable on both sides, but Nathaniel Courthope's valiant stand on the island of Run made the English claim seem justified. The end result of this conflict: a simple trade of the wealthy island of Run for a scarcely-settled island in America named Manhattan.[return][return]This book was enlightening. I have nutmeg in my kitchen cupboard and took it for granted. It costs what, \$3? I've read about the Spice Wars, but knew nothing about the specifics or the sacrifices involved. It made me feel sad at times. People really should know about these things. As much as I enjoyed Nathaniel's Nutmeg, it was a very slow read and took almost a week for me to get through. I am glad I read it, though. Many thanks to the person who reviewed it on 50bookchallenge in 2008 and brought it to my attention.

Kinga says

There was a time when people killed and died for nutmeg. Imagine that! Stinking nutmeg! Not even oregano or at least cinnamon. I must say on my list of things I would be willing to die for nutmeg is somewhere at the bottom, right before marmite.

Nonetheless, The Dutch and the English and the Portuguese would fight relentlessly over the access to nutmeg. Apart from successfully killing the smell and taste of rotten meat, nutmeg was also known for curing just about anything from the plague to impotence. In the beginning of the 17th century nutmeg was in. Maybe one day people will laugh at the lengths we go now to get access and control over the oil resources.

Interestingly enough, nutmegs grew only on a few small remote islands that form part of today's Indonesia. For about two hundred years no one had the brilliant idea of taking some seeds and planting them somewhere else, it seems. Instead, the English and the Dutch fought like maniacs over Banda islands that had very little except for nutmeg. Of course, Giles Milton sympathises with the poor natives who got paid very little for their nutmeg which fetched astronomical prices in Europe. But I'd like to believe that the natives were thinking they were conning the Europeans selling them all that useless nutmeg and getting things like knives and clothes in return. They probably thought: "What in the hell are you doing with all that nutmeg, you crazy white man?".

Long story short, thanks to nutmeg New York is called New York and not New Amsterdam and we are not all speaking Dutch. If you want to know what that has to do with the price of the fish, read the book. You will also learn that the English are good and the Dutch are bad (it is not quite clear why, but apparently the English were more gentlemanly when doing the pirate stuff). Another thing, Nathaniel doesn't appear until towards the end of the book and doesn't do all that much before dying but he makes for a nice title.

This is a book for people who want to know how people found places before the Google Maps and how weird it was when information would travel from one place to another for two years, rather than 0.2 sec. Good God, people used to be patient back then.

Bart Thanhauser says

Summary:

Nathaniel's Nutmeg is about the battle for trade supremacy in the East Indies between the Dutch and English in the late 16th, early 17th century. The book focuses on the Banda Islands—a series of tiny islands in current day Maluku, which itself is an adaptation of the Portuguese word Moluccas meaning “spiceries”. This is essentially what the islands were for European merchants: spice plantations. With waves of the plague hitting Europe and the belief that nutmeg and mace were cure-alls, a pinch of nutmeg was worth a staggering amount. The Banda Islands were some of the only islands in the world where these spices grew and so these tiny, tough to access islands became a battleground for two of the world's naval powers.

Although, I've heard plenty about the Dutch legacy in Indonesia—they oppressed Indonesia for over three centuries—I never knew how contested their initial presence was. Dutch dominance over other European powers was never guaranteed. The British East India Company was originally established to promote trade and compete with Dutch in the East Indies (rather than the Indian subcontinent. With that goal, the English established a trading in “Bantam” (current day Banten, on the Western tip of Java) long before the Dutch established Batavia, and poured plenty of ships and money towards the dream of controlling the spice trade.

Milton's story, however, focuses on the tiny island of Run: one of a handful of islands where nutmeg and mace grew. As nearly every spice island fell to Dutch control, an English merchant, Nathaniel Courthope, and a few dozen other merchants were able to sneak in and declare British sovereignty over Run Island—not too challenging a task as native islanders were so upset with the harshness of Dutch rule that they actually invited British sovereignty in exchange for protection. The British held Run Island for close to a decade and survived food shortages, blockades, and the constant threat of Dutch invasion. This had incredible significance. It prevented a Dutch monopoly of the spice market. In fawning language, Milton gushes about Courthope as a true English patriot forgotten in English history.

The Dutch would eventually capture Run Island and all but kick the English out of Indonesia. But because the British had a right to this island, they eventually were able to “trade” it for the Dutch colony of “New

Amsterdam”. Modern day Manhattan. This is the big fun fact that Milton seemingly builds to throughout the book.

Opinion:

The subject matter of this book is great; it's why I read it. There is a dearth of English language history on Indonesia (at least what is available outside the academic presses). Reading about a lesser known chapter of history—especially a story as seemingly buried as this one was interesting. Kudos to Milton for digging it up. I also learned some really interesting things that I want to hold on to (which I've written below).

But beyond these fun facts this was ultimately a mediocre book. It was history-lite, with plenty of photos and a wide breadth, meant to appeal to a large market. Yet it was slow and not particularly interesting for large chunks. I was ready to eat up this subject matter, but it wasn't very engaging.

Milton isn't a particularly strong writer. He fails to give much personality to his characters or build any significant story lines in the book. The story of Nathaniel Courthope as the hero-patriot of the British seems exaggerated. Throughout most of the book Milton does an admirable job using plenty of primary documents, but when it comes to Courthope, Milton shrugs off academic rigors and paints a picture of a selfless savior. (This despite primary documents that indicate that this guy was a rough merchant known to filch from the company). In short, Milton seems too ready to paint this lame, hero narrative to try strengthen what is already weak writing.

Although I learned some interesting things from this book, and I'm ultimately happy I read it, I would've been much happier if this book was in the hands of a better popular history writer (Erik Larson?)—one who could fledge out the history with greater depth, build a stronger thesis (Milton's thesis that a mid-level merchant altered history isn't that strong), and make the characters more human. Not interesting or entertaining enough for a popular history book and strong enough of a thesis for a serious history book.

Interesting things to hold on to:

- Bantam (modern day Banten) was once a hot smelly, disease-filled port, “infamous in the East for its loose women and lax morals and an air of profligacy hung over the town like the plague of typhoid that frequently descended on its inhabitants” (98). Living in East Java now, this is something I can't imagine at all, which makes details like this fascinating.
- The English and Dutch wasted tons of lives and money searching for a fabled North-East passage above Russia in hopes of shortening the distance to the Spice Islands.
- Henry Hudson was originally looking for this Northeast passage when he decided to throw the chain of his funders and head west to America. When he sailed up the Hudson he thought he had found the Northwest passage—again leading to the Spice Islands.
- Just how brutal the Dutch were. In the Banda Islands, the Dutch Govern General, Jan Coen, practiced a policy of repopulation, “rounding up whole communities of Bandanese and shipping them to Batavia to be sold as slaves” (318). This is essentially genocide.

Emily says

I'm marginally ill today - mild fever, slight achiness, low energy - and because of that, I'm disappointed that I've already finished Giles Milton's *Nathaniel's Nutmeg: or, the True and Incredible Adventures of the Spice Trader Who Changed the Course of History*. Because this, my friends, is my version of the perfect home-sick-from-work book. A true story (more or less), it nonetheless reads like an old-fashioned swashbuckler, complete with bravery, treachery, derring-do, clandestine dealings, betrayals, base incompetence, and much adventure on the high seas. A highly-colored chronicle of the European race for control of the spice islands (the small south-east Asian archipelago that produced the entire world supply of nutmeg and cloves during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* introduces the reader to a rollicking cast of brigands, merchants and adventurers, all of whom are out for a piece of the spice pie. Milton paints a portrait of a Europe obsessed with nutmeg and other spices - not merely as luxurious additions to a meal, but as (they thought) a cure for everything from the common cold to the Bubonic plague. Some London apothecaries even claimed that enough saffron, taken with sweet wine, could raise the dead. (I'm not sure how you were supposed to "take" the wine/saffron combo once you were no longer living, but presumably few people were wealthy enough to find out.) Spice prices in London and other European centers was sky-high, and fortunes could be made by those with enough knowledge and capital to fit out an expedition, and enough bravery or foolhardiness to risk their lives sailing around the world in order to buy nutmeg and other spices at their source.

I was fascinated by the "early modern" character of the world portrayed; the Age of Exploration brought a glut of new information about the world outside Europe, but people - even highly-educated people - had no way of separating the true stories from what, in retrospect, we know to be absurd. The wealth of nations was allocated to missions that now seem outlandish: seventeenth-century geographers, for example, were convinced that the North-East Passage (a supposed navigable sea route from Europe over the North Pole and into the Pacific) *must* exist, because surely God made the world symmetrical up-and-down:

In an age when men still looked for perfect symmetry on their maps, the northern cape of Norway showed an exact topographical correspondence to the southern cape of Africa. Geographers agreed that this was indeed good news; the chilly northern land mass must surely be a second Cape of Good Hope.

In retrospect, it's amazing that an unproved assumption about geological symmetry would have trumped, even for the most intelligent people of the time, the proven fact that if you get water cold enough it will freeze, thereby trapping your ships in the frozen Arctic wastes. In another amazing development, more "evidence" for the existence of a North-East Passage came with the return of a failed Arctic expedition:

[T:]he crew returned to England with a strange horn, some six feet long and decorated with a spiral twirl. Ignorant of the existence of the narwhal - that strange member of the whale family that has a single tusk protruding from its head - the rough English mariners confidently declared that this odd piece of flotsam had once belonged to a unicorn, a highly significant find, for 'knowing that unicorns are bred in the lands of Cathay, China and other Oriental Regions, [the sailors:] fell into consideration that the same head was brought thither by the course of the sea, and that there must of necessity be a passage out of the said Oriental Ocean into our Septentrionall seas.'

So future expeditions, hugely expensive and incredibly risky, were launched on the basis of global symmetry and the knowledge that unicorns are bred in China, along with some ancient texts by Pliny the Elder, claiming that there were open waters at the North Pole. Which is a pretty astounding testament to the power of magical thinking, and makes you wonder which modern assumptions will seem similarly absurd to future generations.

Milton's narrative gets even more exciting once the expeditions actually set off. In addition to stand-offs among the Portuguese, English and Dutch, and the inherent dangers of the voyage (most expeditions lost at least a third of their men to scurvy, dysentery and tropical diseases), there were legion clashes among the grandiose and idiosyncratic personalities involved in these explorations. Henry Hudson, for example, was commissioned to find the North-East Passage: he was given explicit instructions and signed an agreement saying that he would sail up the coast of Norway and then attempt to turn east. Unbeknownst to his backers, however, he never intended to follow this route at all, but immediately headed west to explore the possibility of a North-WEST Passage. There was such a thin membrane of allegiance in many of these stories: Sir Frances Drake, who defeated the Spanish Armada for England and then led an early, successful expedition to the Spice Islands, turned down the next job offer he got from the British East India Company: he had decided to pursue a career of straight-up piracy instead. Even in later years, each voyage sent by the East India Company was out for its own profit, and a second British ship would often commandeer the goods won by a first British ship, rather than working together for the overall profit of the Company. Milton did a good job depicting the chaotic, winner-take-all quality of the times, and made it all seem as fun to read as a nineteenth-century adventure story.

Which is actually a little bit disturbing.

Because, if you think about it, the reason an old-fashioned swashbuckler is fun to read is that the narrative makes certain pirates into the "good guys," and other pirates into the "bad guys." Obviously, in real life NO pirates are good guys, but Milton, despite writing non-fiction, does exactly this same thing. Consistently, throughout his narrative, he paints the British as the good guys and the Dutch as their treacherous adversaries, even when the two sides are acting more or less equally reprehensibly. Every instance of an unprovoked attack or secret conspiracy on the part of the Dutch is treated with an attitude of condemnation, yet not of surprise. Milton seems to be asking the reader "Well, what else would you expect? Gruesome, isn't it?" Whereas stories of the exact same kind of plotting and scheming on the part of the British are met either with excuses on Milton's part, or with outright approval. Milton calls Nathaniel Courthope's practice of running spies under cover of darkness "ingenious," but classifies the actions of a Dutch spy who betrays Courthope as underhanded treachery. In one instance, the British captain William Keeling (a funny duck by all accounts - he organized early productions of Shakespeare plays among his sailors while crossing the Atlantic) has been trying to overcome his Dutch rivals on the islands of Ai and Neira, and has been sending spies among the natives. Many might assume that Keeling was therefore in on the native uprising that ended up slaughtering 48 Dutchmen, but Milton goes to great lengths to suggest that he wasn't:

After the passing of almost four centuries it is hard to piece together exactly what happened next. The Dutch records suggest that William Keeling helped instigate the ensuing massacre, but this accusation contradicts his own diaries. Although he had certainly struck a number of secret deals with the natives, there is nothing to suggest he was actively inciting them to violence. Indeed, he was busy buying nutmeg at Ai Island, a day's sailing journey from Neira, when rumors of a plot began to circulate.

It could just be me, but if I were conspiring with the natives to overthrow my Dutch adversaries, that's the kind of information I might elect to exclude from my journals. You know, so as to avoid HANDING THEM

EVIDENCE in the event of my capture. Of course I don't know anything about the circumstances here; it could be that Keeling really didn't know anything about the uprising. Yet Milton seems willing to impugn Dutch captains and bureaucrats on flimsier, more circumstantial evidence than we can read between the lines here against Keeling. And when he is forced to relate distasteful behavior on the part of the British (such as the men in Henry Hudson's expedition who made a sport of shooting American Indians with muskets from the deck of their ship) he seems extremely grieved by it, whereas similar behavior by the Dutch can pass without comment.

So, *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* was not the most balanced, bias-free history I've ever read. There was a definite jingoistic/nationalistic bent that bothered me more as the book went on, and inspired some eye-rolling toward the end. I would still recommend it, though, to those in the mood for the true(ish) version of the old-fashioned sea yarn.

Sarah says

I have spent a good part of my reading life finishing everything I start. I can count on one hand the number of books I've started and haven't finished. To my credit, I have been a librarian for a long time and rarely do I start something that I don't think I'll like. I read too many book reviews, spend too much time on Goodreads, and pay attention to things like book awards to just randomly pick up a book off the shelf and start it. So my 99% completion rate isn't exactly that surprising.

What is surprising is that this week I am not finishing not one, but two books! A whole new chapter (excuse the pun)!

So Nathaniel's Nutmeg has all the ingredients of something I would like. It is nonfiction that includes colonial expansion, indigenous peoples, ocean voyages, travels to far away lands, political scrambling, commercial trade, and food. But when I sing the praises of narrative nonfiction, I must remember that there are also terrible narrative nonfiction books out there too. This is one of them.

Within the stories of the Spice Islands and the founding of the Dutch East India Company, and the East India Company are some really interesting stories and they are dutifully recorded here in the driest way possible. Juicy stories are told with all the exuberance of a terrible middle school text book. There isn't really a story here, just the relating of some events in a report sort of way. Blerg.

I am about 1/2 way through this and don't think it is worth it to finish.
