



Why We Left: Untold Stories and Songs of America's First Immigrants

Joanna Brooks

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Joanna Brooks's ancestors were among the earliest waves of emigrants to leave England for North America. They lived hardscrabble lives for generations, eking out subsistence in one place after another as they moved forever westward in search of a new life. Why, Brooks wondered, did her people and countless other poor English subjects abandon their homeland to settle for such unremitting hardship? The question leads her on a journey into a largely obscured dimension of American history.

With her family's background as a point of departure, Brooks brings to light the harsh realities behind seventeenth- and eighteenth-century working-class English emigration—and dismantles the long-cherished idea that these immigrants were drawn to America as a land of opportunity. American folk ballads provide a wealth of clues to the catastrophic contexts that propelled early English emigration to the Americas. Brooks follows these songs back across the Atlantic to find histories of economic displacement, environmental destruction, and social betrayal at the heart of the early Anglo-American migrant experience. The folk ballad “Edward,” for instance, reveals the role of deforestation in the dislocation and emigration of early Anglo-American peasant immigrants. “Two Sisters” discloses the profound social destabilization unleashed by the advent of luxury goods in England. “The Golden Vanity” shows how common men and women viewed their own disposable position in England's imperial project. And “The House Carpenter's Wife” offers insights into the impact of economic instability and the colonial enterprise on women.

From these ballads, tragic and heartrending, Brooks uncovers an archaeology of the worldviews of America's earliest immigrants, presenting a new and haunting historical perspective on the ancestors we thought we knew.

Why We Left: Untold Stories and Songs of America's First Immigrants Details

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From Reader Review Why We Left: Untold Stories and Songs of America's First Immigrants for online ebook

Azabu says

The ballads our ancestors brought with them from England to America ...may in fact be the strongest surviving archive of stories about why we left"

Joanna Brooks (American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African American) makes a compelling case that rather than a land of opportunity, colonial America represented a harsh sanctuary. Drawing upon the archives of colonial ballads, she describes the circumstances that propelled 400,000 English across the Atlantic in pre-Revolutionary times. Like today's country music, lyrics of that era relate tales of murder, rivalry, false promises and cheating hearts. Brooks, who chairs the English/Comparative Literature department at San Diego State University, also uses her own lineage to illustrate the hardship of life circa 1770. With unprecedented population growth and an economy that shifted from subsistence to exporting, 18th century England produced a new class of landless laborers , which included her forefathers. The old songs were kept alive by 20th century folk singers such as Davy Crockett Ward and his wife Lina], Horton Barker—the “aristocrat” of the group –and Attie Crane. In the 1930s folklorist Alan Lomax moved his School of the Air radio show to Virginia to collect the traditional tunes now stored at the Library of Congress. That collection includes the ballad of Two Sisters and a Beaver Hat, which concludes: “Then young men have a care/of painted curled Locks. For such, though faire above, below may have the Pox" -- sing along, little dogies!
?

Peter W says

Really great how much the author can pull out of details in folk songs...

Gwen says

Too much analysis of English and American folk ballads and not enough social analysis and statistics for me. Not a bad book, just not what I would like to read about the early English settlers on North America,some of my ancestors just like the author. Guess I'm a social scientist at heart.
