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Review of Untold Stories and Songs of America's First Immigrants, by Joanna Brooks

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BOOK REVIEWS

Why We Left: Untold Stories and Songs of America's First Immigrants. By Joanna Brooks. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Pp. 232. $22.95 cloth)

Joanna Brooks takes a creative approach to entering the minds of some of the earliest colonists in North America, mostly English indentured servants, by deeply reading their balladry. Her study begins by placing these ballads into the historical context of seventeenth-century England and illuminates the depressing social realities that pushed indentured servants out of their homes, insisting that "it was not the magnetic attraction of the land of opportunity that pulled" these immigrants—pull factors she labels "anachronistic fables" invented nostalgically by later generations (p. 9). *Why We Left* is a story of the grim costs of modernity that left remnants in cultural artifacts.

Brooks's work has special value to historians in that she is able to suggest what a nearly universally silent, yet numerically significant, group of early colonists thought, felt, worried about, and strove for. This is quite a remarkable achievement, despite only being able to provide *suggestive* evidence, in that these English indentured servants were illiterate and, as dispensable peasants so common in the eyes of the English elite, they elicited very little commentary by even their literate masters. As a result, Brooks's reading of balladry situated into the social context of enclosure, vagrancy, environmental degradation, and other catastrophes suggests "England colonized its own lands and dislocated its own indigenous peoples before colonizing abroad" (p. 19).

Because balladry as a genre tends to describe "the tension of an impossible or catastrophic situation" (p. 15), ballads are the perfect source to preserve the remnants of the traumatic experiences that indentured servants endured—both those that pushed them out of

England and those that greeted them in their new homeland. Brooks devotes each of her four main chapters to a creative reading of a single ballad to illuminate the experiences of poor English laborers situated in their volatile seventeenth-century world. She reads the ballad "Edward" as a narrative of the English deforestation that resulted in intensified migrancy. "The Two Sisters" reveals the dislocating class realignments expressed through attaching meaning to new products in the context of the shifting Atlantic world commodities exchange. "The Golden Vanity" suggests that the migrants recognized and resented their own disposability to the imperial project. And finally "The House Carpenter" warns the English against the risks of the unknown, particularly the tempting allure of Virginia, whose opportunities can only be bought at the expense of stable traditions. This ballad, in addition to providing a gendered reading of colonization, also suggests immigration was often not worth it.

The author embeds these stories within a personal perspective. Beyond her historical and literary reading, she also situates this book as a family narrative as the use of the word *we* in the title suggests. Although this might make this work approachable and meaningful for some, in a strange way it was slightly off-putting to this reader whose own immigrant ancestry was neither English, indentured, nor fleeing seventeenth-century European upheavals. Although I wanted to feel a personal attachment to the actors whose minds she so ably exposed, and although she did make clear in her introduction that her goal is to "underscore that the experiences of dislocation and disposability that have characterized modernity for so many people are very broadly distributed," I was left feeling strangely and specifically outside this particular founding narrative precisely because of her choice to use the first person as a rhetorical device throughout (p. 21). Her attempt to personalize the stories of these immigrants and make all readers feel a personal relationship to their experiences, in fact, often came off as universalizing only the particular experiences of the early English poor, which was explicitly not her intention. Despite this, *Why We Left* is a fascinating journey through unique

and creative readings into the lives of the early Anglo-American poor, indentured servitude, the Atlantic world, balladry, and the personal upheavals wrought by the earliest pushes of European colonialism.

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Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America. By Karen A. Weyler. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013. Pp. 311. $69.95 cloth; $24.95 paper; $24.95 ebook)

Thanks to scholarship such as Michael Warner's *Letters of the Republic* (1992), Christopher Looby's *Voicing America* (1998), and Sandra Gustafson's *Eloquence is Power* (2000), scholars generally understand the role that the written and spoken word played in the culture of the early United States. However, what we have not known in great detail—and what Karen Weyler so eloquently describes for us—is specifically how people outside of the middle and upper classes used the power of the printed word to carve out a place for themselves in early America. *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America* recounts how many persons considered "outsiders" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries entered into the world of print and, in so doing, expanded what we might think of as traditional notions of authorship. In her book, Weyler focuses on Phillis Wheatley, a young African American female poet enslaved in Boston during the Revolutionary era; Briton Hammon and John Marrant, two African American men who composed wildly popular Indian captivity narratives; Samson Occom, a well-known Mohegan sachem and Presbyterian minister who traveled extensively both in British North America and in Indian country; Deborah Sampson, a woman who disguised herself as a man in order to fight in the Revolutionary War; and Clementia Rind, a Williamsburg, Virginia,