

Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony

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In November of 1587, a report reached London claiming Sir Walter Raleigh's expedition to land English settlers in America had foundered. The colony on Roanoke Island off of the coast of North Carolina-115 men, women, and children-had disappeared without a trace. For four hundred years, the question of what became of the doomed settlers has remained unanswered. Where did they go? What really happened? Why were they on Roanoke Island in the first place, as that was not their destination? Using her consummate skills as an anthropologist and ethnohistorian, **Lee Miller** casts new light on the previously inexplicable puzzle of Roanoke, unraveling a thrilling web of deceit that can be traced back to the inner circle of Queen Elizabeth's government to finally solve the lasting mystery of the Lost Colony.

Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony Details

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
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From Reader Review Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony for online ebook

Briansmom says

OK, I bought this book right before a vacation to the Outer Banks, a place where I have been many times. I have been to Roanoke Island, I have seen "Lost Colony," the Tony-winning summer stock outdoor production, produced every summer in Manteo, and I love the history and the mystery of it all. I wanted to love this book, too. But it has several problems. One, I'm not sure just who this Lee Miller is. Is she a historian? A journalist? A researcher? Or just a hobbyist? Because she is most definitely NOT a writer. Most annoying? Her habit of writing. Incomplete. Sentences. Is this a journal?? Or a book?? Enough said.

Next is the problem the author has of making broad, general sweeping statements and assumptions. I'm not sure that her conclusions are accepted by historians. She feels that she has solved the mystery of the Lost Colonists, which no one has been able to do for over 400 years. Is this so? She certainly believes it is.

Also, I picked this book specifically because it was not supposedly written in an academic (read: boring) style: the jacket says it reads like a "suspense novel." Well, it sure doesn't read like any "suspense novel" I've ever read, nor would (past maybe the first 20 pages or so.)

On the positive side, Ms. Miller appears to have done an enormous amount of research on both sides of the Atlantic. It's nice to know that a 400-year old mystery still generates some literary fervor.

I don't know for sure if I totally buy her end conclusions, mainly because I skimmed over some of the more boring and complex sections. I will continue my quest, though, for a non-fiction book on this topic that isn't dull and bogged down in intrigue and minutia.

Jen says

Growing up within an hour of Jamestown, I've always had a bit of a fascination with the early colonies. Imagine my surprise as a youngster to find out my beloved Jamestown wasn't the first! The teachers seemed to gloss over this, because obviously anything wonderful in the world happened within the confines of the great Commonwealth of Virginia. And Roanoke...well that was just poor planning.

I picked up the book because it sounded like an interesting investigation into the Lost Colonists, who seemed to just vanish, admittedly after they hadn't looked for them in three years. I mean, if after three years you came to my house and I was gone, you wouldn't call me the Lost Jen.

The book puts forward an interesting theory that the colonists were set up to discredit Raleigh. This is supported by...uh....not a heck of a lot. Miller stretches the evidence to fit her needs, sometimes repeating as fact mere conjecture. (Example: If Leicester was as adroit a poisoner as Miller says--giving a list of victims--he would have offed Burghley about eight times over, and he would have poisoned his wife rather than having her fall down the stairs. The fact is that diseases that came on suddenly were often attributed to poison and/or witchcraft. To repeat such fallacies in a book is simply poor history.)

Miller also writes this book as a poorly executed episode of Law and Order. She moves backwards and

forwards through time in a way that just would make the head spin. She reports on things as mere lengthening devices, puts forward "suspects" (no, really, she actually calls them that) and goes into great detail about their lives only to go "nope, wasn't him." It all gets really tiresome.

The biggest failing of this book is her almost compulsive use of quotations. In the introduction, she states that she is putting all quotations in italic to make it easier to read. What it does in reality is a poor job of disguising that Miller has only really written about half the entire book. And by only citing the quote in endnotes, the reader is left to really wonder about bias, motivation, and source of every lengthy italic section. Without providing the source, any quote is no better than scrawled graffiti. And I can not overstate that Miller quotes a lot. Sometime a page is over 75% italic, which no doubt made writing this book much easier. It make reading it, and taking its assertions seriously much harder.

In the end, although the book is enjoyable at time, and makes an intriguing case for Walsingham being a mastermind conspirator--which he no doubt was, the book fails to really educate the reader fully about Roanoke. If the author had stuck to analyzing her sources, and letting the story tell itself rather than cloaking it in Holmesian tweed, she would have a really good book on her hands. As it is...it's not worth the italics.

Molly says

Ughhh. This one's going back on the shelf. The writing is so melodramatic, and the number of sentence fragments makes my skin crawl. How many times throughout the book does the author use a sentence nearly exactly like, "But what happened to the lost colonists?" QUIT ASKING THE QUESTION AND JUST ANSWER IT, WOMAN. The historical research seems sound, but the way this book is written is appalling. Maybe I'm a purist, but I like my history writing to look like history writing, not a really bad detective yarn.

Alyson says

Miller's argument about what happened to the lost colony on Roanoke island is interesting and unusual. But her writing style is horrifying. Fragments aren't sentences. Small children know this. Are taught this. In school. Miller, however, doesn't seem to know this.

The entire 260-page book is written like that, I suppose, to add drama. Every now and then there are paragraphs written in complete sentences, and those paragraphs are like a breath of fresh air. Unfortunately, those paragraphs are rare; I had to give up about a third of a way into the book. I'd have been smacked down in school if I'd turned in anything written the way this book is written.

Marigold says

This is a very odd & oddly funny history about the disappearance of a group of over 100 settlers on the North Carolina island of Roanoke in 1587. I wanted to read it because I love real-life historical mysteries. I would have gotten more out of it if it were not so badly written. Miller takes elements of a cliffhanger murder mystery, a history of Elizabethan political favoritism, and an anthropological examination of Native

American languages, & tries to make a coherent book out of it. To top it off, she decided the mystery would be more mysterious if she didn't write about events in chronological order! Mysterious indeed! I think this is an interesting story & I was intrigued by what I learned about the Native American tribes. But the unintentionally hilarious style made it impossible for me to take it seriously! "Their forsaken condition means only one thing...SABOTAGE." (Cue dramatic music.) "Could there be more to this story?" Miller asks. "How on earth did this happen?" she writes. "I don't KNOW!" Marigold replies. Let me turn the page and find out! And my favorite Miller-ism - "The time has come. We must face the horror." Really, I almost fell off my chair laughing! (And my friends don't know why I find history so frequently hilarious!)

Harold Titus says

Of the four major secondary sources that I have read that narrate Walter Raleigh's attempts to establish an English settlement on the coast of North America in the 1580s, Lee Miller's *Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony* is probably the most informative and definitely the most entertaining.

Miller's research is extensive. (Even her footnotes give useful information) Not content just to tell the conventional story of Raleigh's attempts, she provides valuable context.

We learn about the misery of life in England and, more particularly, London. Miller writes that fish markets and butchers shops at London's waterfront abound. The stench is overwhelming. Offal is channeled down to waiting dung boats on the Thames. Streets are twisted and narrow, with constant congestion of carts and coaches. Around the base of St. Paul's Cathedral booksellers' stalls and printers' shops swarm. Skulking around them are knaves, pickpockets, and thieves. Rudeness "is in keeping with an overall atmosphere of self-indulgence. A shirking of personal responsibility. ... Anger is allowed free rein; street brawls are common. Couples easily separate when tired of marriage. ... the swelling army of puffy and corpulent citizens indicates an absence of self-denial" (Miller 35). Bear-baiting is a favorite public entertainment. Crowds of idlers sit in stands to watch specially trained dogs, one by one, attack a bear who is tethered to a post and whose teeth have been broken short.

Additionally, Miller explains the history of Queen Elizabeth's difficulties with Spain beginning with King Phillip II's ascension to the throne in 1556. She writes about the intrigues against Elizabeth's life that involve Mary Stuart, the one-time queen of Scotland. We read about Mary's duplicity, arrest, trial, and execution.

Miller provides a character sketch of Walter Raleigh, relates his beginnings and his rise to power, portrays his enemies, and narrates his downfall.

She offers reasons to explain why ordinary men and several of their wives and children leave England in 1587 to settle in the New World.

Miller's book is excellent for its range of historical information. That she attempts to answer two lingering questions about the Roanoke settlements makes her book even better. Why was Walter Raleigh's 1587 attempt -- led by the artist John White -- to establish a permanent settlement doomed to fail? What really happened to the "lost" settlers that White could not locate upon his return to Roanoke in 1590?

Lee Miller is the only historian to theorize that the 1587 attempt was deliberately sabotaged. She reviews each of Queen Elizabeth's four primary councilors and presents compelling evidence that the saboteur was

her secretary of state Francis Walsingham.

The conventional wisdom of most historians about the “disappearance” of a major portion of White’s settlers is two-fold. One, they relocated either on the south shore of Chesapeake Bay or 50 miles inland from Roanoke Island somewhere up the Chowan River and, two, they were slaughtered years later by the Powhatan Indian nation. Miller speculates that they settled somewhere along the Chowan River but were almost immediately destroyed by a vicious interior tribe that coastal Algonquian tribes called Mandoag. She lays out arguments as to why Jamestown officials declared that John White’s “lost colony” had been killed by the Powhatans and why the few rumored survivors of White’s colony were spread across North Carolina’s interior.

A third reason why I valued this book is Miller’s skillful use of descriptive language. In certain places she writes like a novelist. Here are two examples.

John White and Thomas Hariot approach Paquye Lake – “They follow a wooded trail, damp and spongy underfoot, around knotty cypress knees jutting out of stagnant water the color of weak tea, tainted with tannic acid. Scarlet-headed parakeets tumble wildly into the air, frightened... The path skirts trees the girth of five men, primordial giants draped in skeins of green vine. Tendrils curl, cascading downward, twisting over the ground below. Then, without warning, incongruous amid the tangle, a ring of blue water” (Miller 89).

Evening scene at Aquascogoc – “Offshore, Indian dugouts ride a crimson tide as the sun tumbles into the sound. Shimmering fire across the water. Fishermen, in grand silhouette, lay their nets, rhythmically casting and hauling in. Butterflies unfolding glistening wings of nettle fiber. A graceful dance. Eventually the boats, lit up by torches, will twinkle toward land. Drawn by the fires of Aquascogoc. The domed houses gleam with muted light, illuminating woven wall patterns like stained glass, spilling warm shapes across the tamped ground outside. Each design different. Stars and geometrics; kaleidoscopic forms, birds and fish” (Miller 90).

Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony is a special book.

Russell says

I like books. I like to read. There aren't many books I don't like.

This book was one of those. I **hated** the author's writing style. I couldn't stand it.

I'm sure the content is great, Ms. (Mrs.?) Miller did lots of research, but it was so poorly written I couldn't slog through it.

What was wrong? She used sentence fragments *everywhere*. It was choppy, disconcerting and I had to put it down out of sheer frustration around page 94 or so.

Shame on her editor.

Sadly, I can't recommend this book.

Jackie says

I would have. Enjoyed this book more. If the author could write. In complete sentences.

Ray Ziemer says

Lee Miller's "Roanoke" is subtitled "Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony," and she approaches the history in just that way: As a mystery to be solved.

If one didn't know much about the failed first English attempt at colonization in the Americas, this book would not be a starter. It's heavy on obscure details, rife with quotes from primary sources (backed by pages of end notes), and broad in its scope. Of course, these are all the very characteristics that make it a unique challenge for history buffs and others particularly interested in early colonial period.

One problem inherent to her approach is the organization. I admire the author's creativity, but can't help thinking the book would be easier to digest if it were written in chronological order. Instead, Miller starts with the colonists in 1587 on Roanoke Island of the future North Carolina, with the departure of Governor John White. The narrative quickly skips to White's return in 1590, and the discovery that will haunt American history for centuries: of the 115 men, women, and children left behind, not a trace is ever found. After establishing the mystery of their disappearance, it is Miller's intention to treat the events as a crime, examining the evidence, considering suspects, and revealing who is responsible for the deaths. Miller describes from the beginning the governor's difficulties in returning to the colony, leaps back to earlier explorations of the coast and previous military settlements, and ultimately takes the reader back to Elizabethan England to consider Sir Walter Raleigh's political rise and fall, his enemies, and those possibly responsible for sabotaging the colony's chances for survival.

Miller also considers the Roanoke mystery as a case of missing persons, attempting to discover what may have happened to any of the English colonists who survived starvation or massacre. This interesting exercise examines many first-hand accounts from those who followed in search of the lost planters -- relief expeditions, later explorers, the Jamestown settlers, and curious travelers throughout the succeeding centuries. Unfortunately much of the discussion is muddled in a linguistic quagmire of cognates between dead native languages and sketchy geography.

A few other problems complicate the reading -- a bit of fallacious logic here and there, some great leaps of assumption. Then there is the author's constant stylistic use of the sentence fragment. Like this. For effect. Throughout the book. No kidding.

Nevertheless, I found the book very intriguing, and learned a lot of detail that helps me put that period of history into perspective. Raleigh's career and his relationship with Queen Elizabeth, the war with Spain, Sir Francis Drake and the Spanish Armada, rebellion in the Low Countries all figured in the fate of the colony. In often vivid detail, primary sources describe the dangers of sailing the Outer Banks, the jealousies of Elizabethan courtiers, and the treachery of the English in their dealings with the natives. All in all, I found it a worthwhile book.

Paul Haspel says

Lee Miller's *Roanoke* seeks to offer a solution to America's oldest mystery: the fate of the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island, North Carolina. In 1590, a belated attempt to send relief to 115 English colonists on Roanoke Island found only a deserted settlement, with the word "Croatoan" carved on a tree. What happened to the Lost Colonists? Were they killed by the Spaniards, enslaved by hostile Native Americans, shipwrecked while trying to sail to nearby Hatteras Island (then called "Croatoan")? Miller in *Roanoke* offers her own solution, one that skews a bit too close to conspiracy theory for my tastes. Her setting forth of palace intrigue in the court of Queen Elizabeth I is interesting, but I was not persuaded that Sir Francis Walsingham, England's master of espionage, would have had an incentive to seek the failure of the Roanoke Island colony. Strengths of the book include its sympathetic portrayal of John White, the unhappy expedition leader who left his daughter and grand-daughter on Roanoke Island, returned to find them gone, and spent the rest of his life a broken man, trying in vain to mount rescue expeditions, wondering what had happened to little Virginia Dare. I also appreciated Miller's insightful and sympathetic portrayal of the Native American societies of the Outer Banks and lower Chesapeake Bay regions. For readers interested in Outer Banks history, this book is worth a look, though I would balance it with other accounts such as David Stick's *Roanoke Island: The Beginnings of English America*.

Gina says

Overall, I thought the author presented a very well-researched and plausible explanation for what happened to the Roanoke Colony. It seemed like there wasn't much information available about the Colony, so I was surprised she was able to write an entire book about it. A few major complaints that almost prevented me from finishing the book:

- The first 2/3 of the book was pretty dry, and it finally picked up at the end.
 - The author used italics to when quoting various sources, mostly in the middle of sentences. That prevented her from being able to use italics for emphasis, and I found it to be very distracting.
 - The author had the worst editor of all time, who allowed her to get away with fragmented sentences...throughout the entire book. Here is an example: "Walsingham is the Queen's Principal Secretary. Secretary of State. Master politician. Machiavellian." It drove me crazy!
 - The author presented the story of Roanoke like it was a game of Clue, which trivialized the events and made it seem childish (the cover looks like it was going for a middle-school demographic).
- So if you can get past those things, I would recommend this book!
-

di says

What the heck??? How did this book ever get past an editor? I wanted to actually take 3 random pages & count the number of sentence fragments versus complete sentences, just to prove how bad it was. I estimated at least 1/3 of them were fragments, which was hugely frustrating. I had to read & re-read, just to make sure I hadn't missed something because the flow was so terrible. I didn't end up doing my little experiment, because by the end of the book I was so tired of it all! I just wanted to get it out of my sight!

So why didn't I rate it a 1? I almost did, & probably I should give it a 1.5. But if Miller's writing skills are

below par, her research is good. She took a topic that I didn't think there was any information about & (I think) solved the case. But then, it was so belabored, with way too much information. And so redundant! I vowed to throw the book against the wall if she said something about Lane being the cause of the colonists demise one more time. I think she said it seven times. I just wanted to scream, "so get on with it! What did he do already?????" It took her 50+ pages to tell me, & it was mostly dry & repetitive. She could have done it in 10. Less would have even been better.

And maybe even worse than the fragmented sentences was Miller's use of sources & her own interjected interpretations. The quotes were interspersed in italics throughout...badly done, & then after quoting someone (you had to check the back to find out what the source was, which would have been too tiring to attempt) Miller would judge, "this, of course was a lie. Nobody would do such a thing," or something like that, which I just found entirely irresponsible as a historian. But on she would go, as if her interpretation was, of course, correct. Then, after 100 pages or so, she'd drop another primary source which backed her up. So by the end, I'd think her case was sound...but why didn't she just drop the source to begin with? It was annoying to me.

Speaking of annoying. The end. The whole book Miller makes out like it's going to be a shocker. A murder! Hidden evidence! And at the end, it wasn't. It was exactly what I learned in high school, that it was believed that the colonists intermarried with different tribes, although they might have been killed or starved. That was pretty much her conclusion too. I didn't know about Elizabeth's privy council's connections. Some of that was interesting, but there was just way too much information, only a fraction of which was really all that relevant & important to the case.

Altogether, I probably only finished the book because I have such a hard time abandoning a book once I start it. But I wouldn't recommend this one to anyone unless they had a strong interest already in the subject, & could overlook the terrible writing.

After reading through my review I think I must rate it a 1.

El says

Jeeeeebus.

This was a slog.

I'm fascinated with people (or groups of people) who disappear because, well, that's pretty neat. The Lost Colony of Roanoke is one of the most interesting because after 400 years, the mystery still has not been solved. Lee Miller put up a good front, she had a semi-interesting theory. But. All of that was covered up by her overwrought writing, her convenient use of misdirection (ooh, look over there!), the sloppiness of "seamlessly" weaving her own writing with quotes from primary sources, and the fact that she seems incapable of writing complete sentences. All of this was certainly meant to add drama to a story that no one really knows, but it also made me feel that she was stretching history to fit her own personal theory. For an anthropologist such as Miller, this seems pretty inappropriate.

The other parts of history that she used (ad nauseum) are fascinating all on their own - lengthy studies of

Native Americana (is that a real thing? Whatever, I'll just make it up as I go along...), Queen Elizabeth, Walter Raleigh, etc. etc. But there was *so* much of those things that the waters of the mystery just got more and more muddled.

With all the backtracking, jumping forward, spinning around, and generous use of exclamation points and question marks, I realized I wasn't reading a book of history at all, even though that's the section where I found the book. This could pass as historical fiction, *maybe*, or some new section of a bookstore needs to be created where books of complete bullshit need to be shelved.

I just... whatever. There's some merit here, but her attempt at making it more shiny than it was (or should be) makes it feel speculative at best, filled with supposition and asking more questions than providing answers.

There are probably better books out there about this topic, and I hope to find them. I think this book is fine for certain readers, but I'm not sure what kind of readers those would be. Going into it, don't expect it to be an easy read. As someone who isn't turned off by difficult books, this says a lot - it was made more complicated than was necessary, and the only reason for that is that Miller felt she needed the additional padding to validate her theory.

Jenny says

I am very interested in this topic, and I am looking forward to finding out what might have happened, but first I have to get past the author's love of sentence fragments. Seriously--what is wrong with sentences that have clauses? Commas are your FRIENDS.

Mike says

Roanoke is book of history which is built on a single main thesis, but what is interesting about it is that instead of stating the thesis and then hammering home the items of support for that thesis, Miller lays out the supporting information piece by piece, building a case for her thesis and only revealing it towards the end of the book. She attempts to answer two questions: what happened to the Roanoke colony, why were they screwed over, and who screwed them over? (OK, that's three questions. No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!)

The first part of the book is the hardest to get through, but Miller paints a bleak and at times frightening picture of what it was to be in a remote part of the world, hiding desperately from enemies from other European countries on a hurricane-pounded shore, surrounded by natives of unknown hostility and "protected" by soldiers with definite hostility. The colonists, months (and in the end, years) away from any help from home, have been set up to fail.

The story then skips back to Britain and the court of Elizabeth I, where we learn more about the origins of the colony and the political forces behind (and opposing) it. The destruction of the colony becomes about the destruction of one particular courtier, and Miller then establishes the motives, means, and opportunities of her case. The logistics of the colony's ruination are laid out, their destruction is secured along with the political downfall of the courtier, and the traces of the colony are then tracked through local folktales, stories told after the event to later investigators, and even physical/genetic markers.

I enjoyed it very much, and recommend it for anyone who is interested in court intrigue or understanding the tenuousness of early New World colonization. I think Miller makes her case.
