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# Reckoning Roanoke: A Historiographical Examination of the Lost Colony

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## ABSTRACT

The disappearance of the Lost Colony of Roanoke is an American mystery which has baffled historians for centuries. This paper takes a historiographical view of the works of academics Lee Miller and James Horn, comparing their research and conclusions on the topic. Miller's belief that the colony was sabotaged by English secretary of state Sir. Francis Walsingham and Horn's theory that an English desire for mineral wealth and poor preparation for survival in the New World brought about their demise are each analyzed for their legitimacy, research gaps, and possible biases. Through this analysis, it is concluded that the field of study on the attempted colonization of Roanoke and the settlers who disappeared there could benefit from a broader consideration for factors, outside of English politics and Native American relations, which may have contributed to the Lost Colonists' disappearance.

**Keywords:** Roanoke, Lost Colony, Lee Miller, James Horn

In the 1580s, England was just beginning its attempt at colonization in the New World thanks in part to the patronship of Sir Walter Raleigh and his expeditions to Roanoke, just off the Outer Banks of modern North Carolina. It was his final attempt at settlement there, now known as the Lost Colony, that has been of particular interest to historians of this time period. It was here that a group of more than one hundred settlers vanished between the years 1587 and 1590 with only two clues left as to what may have happened to them; the word 'CROATOAN' carved into a post as well as 'CRO' etched into a tree trunk. With such little information left in their wake, historians are left with questions about what led to this disappearance and what their fate may have been. This paper will primarily analyze the works of Lee Miller and James Horn and the theories they present as to what may have happened to the Lost Colonists during their time at Roanoke and after their

disappearance. Miller and Horn agree that English political factors, such as sabotage or the search for mineral wealth, played a role in Roanoke's unfortunate beginnings, and that settlers' disappearance is connected to surrounding natives. However, Miller and Horn disagree on the nature of the natives' involvement.

Anthropologist Lee Miller and historian James Horn are both intellectuals whose research and writings on the Roanoke colony are well referenced and perceived by others in their field of study. They published their works on the Lost Colony only a decade apart, with Miller's book coming out in 2000 and Horn's being published in 2010. Despite their relatively small age gap, the works present markedly different conclusions as to the circumstances and fate of the colony. By focusing on the two, I intend to highlight the diverse inferences they possess despite sharing similar ideas about certain aspects of

this venture. Their differing conclusions are indicative of the historiography of the Roanoke Colony and emphasize that the way this American mystery is perceived is far from certain or settled.

Lee Miller, an anthropologist who specializes in Native American history, in her book *Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony*, uses primary sources, such as Governor John White's journal and watercolor depictions from the first venture to Roanoke, to assert theories as to why the last Roanoke colony failed and what happened to its settlers. She presents three primary questions in her work: Why were the lost colonists lost, where did they go, and why were they never recovered? She begins answering these questions with a bold thesis claiming Roanoke was set up to fail by Queen Elizabeth I's secretary of state, Sir Francis Walsingham, in order to thwart Sir Walter Raleigh's rapidly growing wealth and favor in the Elizabethan court.<sup>1</sup> Raleigh, an English statesman, funded attempts to settle Roanoke rather than set sail to the New World himself. His favor in the English court and funding of the Roanoke ventures left him "vaunted... as the patron as well as the prototype of geography," giving Walsingham ample reasons to desire his demise.<sup>2</sup> To support this theory, she explains that White's group had not planned to settle in Roanoke originally but rather in the Chesapeake Bay region.

According to Miller, when Captain Simone Fernandez deposited them at Roanoke, he did so as a direct act of "mutiny, pure and simple."<sup>3</sup> Due to the violent acts of Ralph Lane, who had led Raleigh's previous expedition, towards the native groups there, tensions between the natives and settlers at Roanoke were high and the English unwelcome. Therefore Walsingham, aware of the dangers of Roanoke, persuaded Fernandez to strand the colonists as a way to secure their failure. As a specialist on Native

American history, Miller focuses heavily on native groups and their poor relations with the English. She uses many of White's watercolor depictions of the flora, fauna, and culture of this period, which are important in understanding Native life and how the Englishmen understood and interpreted it. The artwork divulges how the English mindset towards Native living and vice versa may have affected the relationship between the two.<sup>4</sup> She posits that, due to tensions resulting from Lane's violence, the colonists attempted to leave for the Island of Croatoan, leaving the name carved into a tree and post as White claims to have instructed them to do in his journal.<sup>5</sup> She believes they were eventually captured by the Mondoag Indians and taken to the Occaneechi trade mart where they were sent to interior nations as slaves.<sup>6</sup> As to why the colonists were never recovered, she asserts that John Smith and the settlers of Jamestown discovered the lost colonists working as servants upon their arrival. When they realized they would be unable to recover them, the Englishmen spun a lie saying the colonists had been murdered.<sup>7</sup>

Though Miller cites primary sources such as Sir Walter Raleigh's letters and journal, as well as that of Governor John White, she substitutes assumptions in portions of her research that lack definite evidence. Throughout her book, she employs comments such as "if we are right that..." "Suppose the explanation was as follows," or phrases of the like when making connections about people and occurrences that affected Roanoke.<sup>8</sup> In this way, her assertions border precariously on assumptions and leave the reader to ask, 'suppose the explanation is not as follows?' While Miller presents a novel idea in her thesis that Roanoke was sabotaged by Sir Francis Walsingham to ruin Raleigh's place in the Elizabethan court, it can be scrutinized for its boldness. Her theory, while possible, is not overwhelmingly persuasive as it overlooks other more widely accepted

and probable possibilities. Examples of such include the belief that Captain Fernandez stranded White and his colonists at Roanoke because he was paid or persuaded by another means, rather than the belief more widely accepted by historians that Fernandez left the colonists due to the onset of winter and a desire to return to the Caribbean.

Claims such as her assertion that the colonists were eventually found by Jamestown settlers and were said to be murdered as a cover for the truth are simply not supported at all. Such errors expose a possible bias towards her personal expectation as to what happened. Despite Miller's intriguing narrative, it should be considered that the Roanoke disaster resulted from a lack of English preparation for settlement in America rather than an active plot to produce its failure. Another possibility which may answer for the colonists' demise could be that, upon finding themselves unable to survive alone on Roanoke Island as a simple result of poor planning rather than sabotage, they integrated with native tribes in the surrounding regions, which is the favored theory of historian James Horn.

Horn, an English born historian and expert on the history of Virginia and 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century America, in his book *A Kingdom Strange: The Brief and Tragic History of the Lost Colony of Roanoke*, tells this American story with a predominantly English focus fixating on the English desire for mineral gain through colonization. Horn argues that, to Raleigh, "colonization and privateering were closely connected," which is why the Chesapeake Bay region was set as the colonists' intended destination.<sup>9</sup> Unlike most historians who attribute Captain Simone Fernandes with stranding White and the colonists at Roanoke, Horn asserts that White may have conspired with Fernandes in deciding to winter there before heading to Chesapeake Bay in the summer.<sup>10</sup> Although

there were deep tensions with the natives at Roanoke, Horn claims White believed he could repair the hostility created by Ralph Lane.

In an analysis of Lane's incursion, written by Kathleen Donegan, Donegan delves into Lane's time on the island, specifically outlining his relations with the native people there. She calls Lane's colonial incursion a "chaos zone" in which a "season of growing weariness, discipline, and change in the political landscape" led to tensions and the eventual slaughter of the Dasemunkepeuc tribe and its leader Pemisipan.<sup>11</sup> White was unable to mend these rifts and, by leaving for England to gather supplies, left the settlers in an unmanageable situation with the natives causing them to vacate the colony. Unlike Miller, who claims the colonists left the island before eventually being taken captive and traded inland, Horn believes that the colonists left their settlement, as indicated by the carvings, and managed to successfully integrate into native life. Horn and Miller agree on one point. Both academics believe at least a portion of the Lost Colonists ended up in Powhatan territory to later be discovered by Jamestown settlers in some fashion.

Rather than asserting that the Jamestown settlers invented the murder of the Lost Colonists as a cover up for their enslavement, Horn concludes the Jamestown expedition arrived at Chesapeake Bay in April of 1607 and began hearing talk of "people with short coats and sleeves to the elbows" who lived in the Ocanahonan region.<sup>12</sup> Believing the Lost Colonists would be invaluable for their knowledge of the land and how to find wealth, John Smith began searching for them diligently. Leaning heavily on Smith's journal entries from the time, Horn outlines the search for the colonists and the eventual news, given by the native Manchumps, that after living

“peaceably for twenty odd years with the Indians... they were suddenly attacked without provocation by Wahunsonacock’s warriors” upon the arrival of the Jamestown expedition in 1607.<sup>13</sup> This attack eradicated all but a small number of settlers who may have managed to find protection among other tribes but were never to be recovered by the English.

Horn’s recounting of this American mystery is an insightful view of the factors which contributed to the final Roanoke venture and the fate of the colonists who disappeared. He effectively uses maps, primary source collections, and anthropological evidence to assert his theory that the final Roanoke venture, spurred by a desire for commercial gain, eventually found it necessary to disband and settle among native tribes in order to survive. While this basic theory is probable and shared by many in the field, his following conclusion that they lived peacefully among the Native Americans for twenty years is doubtful. In the harsh environment of the New World, filled with disease, hardship, and pre-established tensions with native groups, their seamless assimilation for two decades, only to be wiped out on the arrival of the English in 1607, can appear to be too simple of an answer. Horn also exposes his possible bias as an English historian by focusing significantly on English political motives for the venture (such as their desire to obtain material wealth), Sir Walter Raleigh and his place within the court, and White’s three-year span in England before finally being able to return to America. His time spent on matters such as the threat posed to England by the Spanish Armada in 1588, which he discusses in depth in chapter five of his work, “The Broken Promise,” appears as a detour from the intended focus. Horn’s explanation of the Armada War as a reason White was unable to return to his colonists, as well as Horn’s subsequent outline of White’s continued

setbacks before his final return, could have been accomplished with more brevity in order to keep focus more firmly on the Roanoke Colony. His dedication to such topics leaves the reader desiring a fuller interpretation of what makes his conclusion significant to the study of Roanoke and how it should shape the way in which this American mystery is viewed moving forward.

Lee Miller and James Horn each offer novel insight pertaining to the Lost Colony at Roanoke, focusing heavily on English political or commercial factors and Native American connections to the settlers’ disappearance. Their conclusions that the colonists were sabotaged, taken as captives, or chose to integrate into native cultures are an important piece of the search for answers but fail to fully consider explanations outside of English or Native American influence. In the years leading up to and during the final settlement at Roanoke, England and Spain were commercial, political, and colonial rivals. When Spain discovered Florida and began to attempt settlement there, the Spanish did not appreciate English interest in what they considered their territory and its surrounding area, nor did they enjoy contending for naval dominance with England. A permanent settlement at Roanoke would have provided England with a port from which to participate more consistently in trade and even piracy, thereby weakening Spanish power in the Indies.<sup>14</sup> What Miller and Horn fail to sufficiently dissect is that such relations with Spain may have provided reason for their involvement with the disappearance of the Roanoke colonists, a theory explored by others such as J. Wright. While there is not definitive proof that the Spanish found the colony, he claims that an effort to do so was made and that, should they have been successful, it could have spelled disaster for the Roanoke settlers.<sup>15</sup>

Another realm of possibility left unexplored in their research is that the colonists, abandoned by White, may have attempted to leave Roanoke not to merge with native groups but to return to England. Through my research, it was my observation that this realm of possibility presented a viable fate for the colonist that both Miller and Horn left unexplored. Just as the expedition led by Ralph Lane, which came before them in 1585, perhaps the colonists attempted to sail back to England upon a passing ship and, for one reason or another, failed to reach their destination. Both scholars rely heavily on the idea that English politics and concerns played a heavy hand in the beginning of the colony's story but gave way to native relations which answer for their mysterious fate. While these conclusions are certainly possible, they fail to account for the full realm of possibility for the Roanoke Colony and the men, women, and children who disappeared. In order to fill the gaps of research, the field of study on Roanoke could benefit from a dedication to exploring such avenues and possibilities.

The contributions of Lee Miller and James Horn to the Roanoke field of study provide insightful evidence compiled from

various journals, maps, illustrations, and source collections, which build a case for their deductions on the fate of the lost colonists. Their conclusions, while similar in the belief that the colonists left their settlement to integrate with native tribes rather than being forced out or attacked by other groups, differ drastically pertaining to the reason, decisions, and ramifications which led to and resulted from this decision. Their research and subsequent conclusions are telling of the many facets which must be considered when attempting to answer the centuries old question: What happened to the lost colonists? With factors at play from the Elizabethan court, Native American relations, and Spanish aggression, it is no wonder that the historiography of the Roanoke colony has grown and changed as historians have grappled to find answers since its disappearance. Perhaps Raleigh's venture was doomed from the beginning as a product of sabotage or rather from a quest for material wealth which ultimately resulted in the dispersion and eventual annihilation of the colonists decades later. One thing is certain: Miller and Horn offer different but equally intriguing analyses that may guide future historians as they continue to try and solve the mystery of the Lost Colony.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lee Miller, *Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony* (New York: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Gosse, "Sir Walter Raleigh." *The Geographical Journal* 21, no. 6 (1903): 602, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775649>.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, *Roanoke*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Leroy Oberg, "Tribes and Towns: What Historians Still Get Wrong About the Roanoke Ventures." *Ethnohistory* 76, no. 4 (2020): 582, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-8579237>.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *Roanoke*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, *Roanoke*, 105.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, *Roanoke*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Roanoke*, 245; 258.

<sup>9</sup> James Horn, *A Kingdome Strange: The Brief and Tragic History of the Lost Colonist of Roanoke* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 40.

<sup>10</sup> Horn, *A Kingdome Strange*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Donegan, "What Happened in Roanoke: Ralph Lane's Incursion." *Early American Literature* 48, no. 2 (2013): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2013.0032>.

<sup>12</sup> Horn, *A Kingdome Strange*, 208.

<sup>13</sup> Horn, *A Kingdome Strange*, 217.

<sup>14</sup> James Leitch Wright, "Sixteenth Century English-Spanish Rivalry in La Florida." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1960): 267, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30140610>.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, "Sixteenth Century English-Spanish Rivalry," 277.

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