

## BECOMING THE LOST COLONY

a review by Donald Paul Haspel

Charles R. Ewen and E. Thomson Shields, Jr. *Becoming the Lost Colony*. McFarland & Company Inc., 2024

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**CHARLES R. EWEN** received his PhD at the University of Florida and is a Professor of Archaeology at East Carolina University. He is the current Director of the Phelps Archaeology Laboratory and was recently elected president of the Society for Historical Archaeology. While at ECU, Ewen has directed projects at Tryon Palace Historic Sites & Gardens in New Bern, Ft. Macon State Park, Hope Plantation, Somerset Place, and Historic Bath, NC.

OPPOSITE Scene from Paul Green's historical drama *The Lost Colony* performed in Manteo, NC, 1937–38

Much remains unknown regarding the Roanoke colonists of 1584–87. Two questions have repeatedly come to mind since a relief expedition in 1590 found England's Roanoke Island colony abandoned, with little besides a carved wooden inscription bearing the word "Croatoan" (possibly a reference to Hatteras Island) to indicate their possible fate. What caused the Roanoke Island colonists to leave their colony – and what ultimately happened to them?

Over the years, many prospective explanations have been advanced to offer solutions for what has come to be known as the "Lost Colony." Some of those explanations are quite fanciful, and all of them have problems, as Charles R. Ewen and E. Thomson Shields, Jr. make clear in their book, *Becoming the Lost Colony: The History, Lore, and Popular Culture of the Roanoke Mystery*.

Authors Ewen and Shields effectively bring their respective areas of expertise to this work. Ewen is an historical archaeologist, and Shields a retired English professor specializing in early American and frontier literature, giving this book a helpful multi-disciplinary perspective. Coming from different fields, with differing standards for evaluating evidence, Ewen and Shields do an effective job of tracing the history of the Roanoke mystery, with a helpful emphasis on how different "solutions" to the mystery often reveal little about the

Roanoke Island colonists but much about the person or people proposing those "solutions."

One of the many strengths of *Becoming the Lost Colony* is the way Ewen and Shields call to question historical testimony that has come to be accepted without question as part of the prevailing conversation regarding the Lost Colonists and their possible fate. These qualities of the book come through in the authors' consideration of one of the key Lost Colony documents, William Strachey's *The History of Travell into Virginia Britania*. Strachey believed that the colonists who survived their 1587 abandonment were killed by warriors of the Powhatan Nation sometime before they could make contact with the Jamestown settlers of 1607.

But Ewen and Shields have concerns regarding the validity of Strachey's account, stating that "[i]t is worth noting that Strachey presents second-hand information, that is, his manuscript fits our definition of a secondary source" (50). When "Strachey repeats his charge that Powhatan killed Raleigh's planters after living near one another for twenty years," the authors tell us, he engages in an act of "turning his story of a slaughter from a point of history into a trope" – a "literary device which can be used to evoke a specific response in readers" (52).

Chapter 4, "From Histories to Stories: Becoming *The Lost Colony*," was especially illuminat-

ing in the way it discussed how approaches to the "mystery" of the Lost Colonists, once the province of historians, became increasingly the province of creative writers, with many fiction writers focusing on Virginia Dare, the first child of English parents known to have been born in the New World. In that connection, Ewen and Shields focus on Eliza Lanesford Cushing's 1837 story "Virginia Dare; or, the Lost Colony: A Tale of the Early Settlers." The authors point out that Cushing "appears to be the first to name the 1587 planters as 'The Lost Colony'" (102) and add that "[b]y turning the 1587 planters into *The Lost Colony*, into a mystery, these writers 'solved' the mystery through fictions, turning the blank slate of what actually happened into pictures of what should have happened" (104). The reader thus gets a sense of how, 250 years after the last known sighting of the colonists, a shared cultural story of the "meaning" of the colonists' experiences began to take shape.

Ewen and Shields set forth the various scenarios that have been presented to explain the reasons for the disappearance of the Lost Colonists – starvation, disease, shipwreck, attack by Spaniards, attack by hostile Native Americans, amalgamation with friendly Native Americans – and then make clear what problems exist with each of these scenarios. Particularly fun are those passages where Ewen and Shields discuss the fringe theories that they refer to as "Lost Colony pseudoscience" and link each of those fringe beliefs with the phenomenon of confirmation bias. "One



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root of confirmation bias," they write, "is when people can't help latching on to the possible over the probable" (153).

In that connection, Ewen and Shields discuss what they call "the best-known Lost Colony hoax" – the so-called "Dare Stones." The year 1937, the time of the premiere of Paul Green's outdoor drama *The Lost Colony* (still the best-known literary treatment of the Roanoke colonists and their unknown fate), was also marked by the "discovery" of the first of forty-seven stones that purportedly provided testimony from Virginia Dare's mother Eleanor regarding the fate of the colonists. Aptly, the authors ask an important question: how and why would Eleanor Dare stop to carve a rock that is "a grave marker on one side and a lengthy, cramped message on the other, all while under great stress – having lost all but seven of her fellow colonists, including her husband and child?" (154)

A thoughtful conclusion, "What We Don't Know and

How We Don't Know It," provides examples of the sometimes-dizzying number of evocations of the Lost Colony's legacy in modern popular culture – everything from a Stephen King mini-series to episodes of *Supernatural*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and *American Horror Story*, and even a sequel to *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*. And at the end of it all, the authors return to what has been a consistent area of emphasis throughout the book: while they "hate to admit that a mystery might never be solved" (173), the authors ask that readers not "ask us where we think the Lost Colony went. Both of us will say, 'I don't know.' And mean it" (174).

The book is well-illustrated, with abundant maps, drawings, and photographs. In a time when misinformation, half-truths, and wishful thinking often dominate discussions of the Roanoke colonists and their still-unknown fate, *Beyond the Lost Colony* provides a salutary corrective. It is an essential work for any student or scholar of the colonial American experience. ■

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