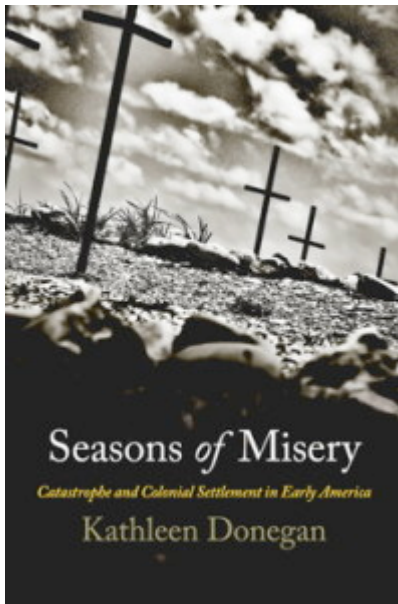


# Unsettling English Settlement



Kathleen Donegan, *Seasons of Misery: Catastrophe and Colonial Settlement in Early America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 260 pp., \$42.

Kathleen Donegan's *Seasons of Misery: Catastrophe and Colonial Settlement in Early America* is a powerful retelling of initial English incursions at Roanoke, Jamestown, Plymouth, and Barbados. Donegan re-reads the works of several English writers who sought to account for their struggle to find sure footing in the Americas. These writers include Ralph Lane, George Percy, Phineas Pratt, William Bradford, and Richard Ligon, among others. The argument Donegan makes for studying the life and works of this ensemble is convincing: the many catastrophes they experienced shaped not only colonial identity but colonial cultural expression as well. Their trials and failures were not anomalies to be ignored or treated with chagrin by historians and literary scholars. Their bewilderment, starvation, and violence were integral to becoming colonists, and seeped into the "language through which new settlers revealed how the social links that tied them to England, and to their own sense of Englishness, were breaking down" (5).



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Donegan's approach is interdisciplinary in the best sense of the word. She alternates between micro history and literary analysis to create what she calls narrative readings. Trauma theory tinctures her narrative readings. Like trauma theorists, she focuses on the horrifying ordeals that people experience and on their effort to comprehend themselves and their world in the wake of such ordeals. However, she seeks to explain the violence her writers inflicted on others as well as the hardships they endured. In her effort to be mindful of their aggression and misery, Donegan uses post-colonial and race-oriented reading strategies while revising concepts to reflect her materials. For instance, she reads travel writing in relation to projected imperial authority, as Mary Louise Pratt does, yet Donegan describes English settlers as living in a chaos zone, not a contact zone, Pratt's term for spaces of cross-cultural interaction.

Donegan begins by approaching Roanoke's mysteries through a reading of Ralph Lane's incursion account. Lane, the colony's governor in 1585, limns disasters and conflicts with Roanoke Indians, an account, as Donegan points out, at odds with the Virginia Eden depicted in Elizabeth I's charter and Arthur Barlowe's narrative. Style matters here too for Donegan. She illustrates how, unlike the prose of official record, Lane's scattered thought exemplifies a unique "idiom for colonial incursion" (32). Here Donegan might have included a reading of [John White's watercolors](#) in order to show how Lane's style compares with early modern visual representations of Virginia. Even without this reading, the chapter makes a compelling point while also introducing readers to an early American who is so often overlooked or misunderstood because of the messiness of his writings.

Donegan's second narrative reading is oriented around the figure of George Percy, Jamestown's president between 1609-1610. She shows how the settlement's first planning documents serve as remedies for Roanoke's failures. Ultimately, she argues that reading these documents and John Smith's writings alone skew

our perspective on Jamestown. As part of her revision of the settlement, she makes the case that Percy, not Smith, be considered the primary spokesman for life in the early colonies. It is Percy who discloses "how Virginia's New World romance turned into a graveyard of meaning" (80). Smith conceives of Virginia history as an opportunity for autobiography; in his account of a self-made man surviving in the wilderness, Percy, more accurately, thinks of this early English incursion history as a period of abjection. Donegan's apt use of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection—being "Not me. Not that. But not nothing either"—helps illuminate her reading of Percy's work (87). Her sobering retelling of the Starving Time, Percy's thwarted departure, his murder of Powhatan women and children, and the Powhatan revenge campaign illustrates the importance of this Englishman's life and work to any narrative of Jamestown.

Intrigued by William Bradford's observation "the living were scarce able to bury the dead," Donegan investigates the literal "problem of remains" in Plymouth in her third chapter (118). She examines writings by Phineas Pratt, Thomas Morton, and Edward Winslow to uncover the death and depravity that Bradford sublimates in his triumphalist history. Haunting highlights from this chapter include settlers coming upon the grave of blond corpses with Indian beads and goods, a startling difference between Pratt's and Increase Mather's account of the sick, and the disturbing reactions to the displayed head of Witawamut. Donegan ends her narrative reading with a stirring thought: "perhaps, the dead were the most important crop the people at Plymouth planted" (154).

Donegan also shows how West Indian incursion follows botched North American settlement efforts. She focuses on Barbados. In Barbadian accounts by John Nicholls and Henry Colt she finds a colonial tropic: a "discursive framework of extremity and extravagance through which West Indian colonials described lives that could not be imagined in England" (156). Within this framework, they expressed their fears of every indulgence that they desired and fulfilled. Donegan uses Richard Ligon's *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657) to pinpoint the style of this colonial tropic at a period when the English sought to start a plantation settlement. Ligon's peril-filled, eroticized descriptions of black women, pineapples, and sugar-making reflect the catastrophes created by this endeavor while also illustrating the crucial role that the islands played in fomenting English interest in colonization.

Donegan's narrative readings are so engaging that I concluded her fourth chapter ready to read one more—perhaps a short descriptive reading of another southern incursion, in Savannah, for instance. Such a reading might have shown how colonial identity and writing evolved in eighteenth-century Georgia, which had a similar climate to Barbados, but a radically different settlement plan and outcome. Instead of providing this type of conclusion, Donegan ends with an afterword that explains why she wrote the book primarily from the vantage point of the English. This explanation ties the book together nicely by returning to the author's first impulses and critical questions. But it also suggests that her study needs additional defenses. It does not. *Seasons of Misery* reveals the

tenuous hold that English settlers had on Native American lands and on their sense of self during fatal forays that bore little resemblance to imperial plans. Thanks to Donegan, these settlers' writings are no longer embarrassing preludes. They are crucial to understand in their contexts, as well as for understanding the cultures that develop after them.

Like any important scholarly work, *Seasons of Misery* does raise questions, which might spur new projects. For example, her book made me wonder about the ways that non-English writers expressed their assortment of miseries in the Americas. Donegan's approach as well as her historical and literary conclusions, I concluded, might be used to help re-read earlier works such as Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación* (1542) and to reconsider representations of bewilderment and aggression in Native American, African American, and Euro-American colonial-era writings. Additionally, moments in the book where weather becomes a relevant subject lead me to reflect on how a sense of the natural world and climate change influenced representations of failed settlement. Introducing more of an ecological focus—perhaps by working concepts from environmental history into conversation with Donegan's selected readings—might further illuminate patterns of settler anomie and aggression. This focus may help us see how early moderns might have read accounts of these bereft European settlers and, moreover, might clarify how those of us who confront environmental disasters today can learn from them. Such queries are a sign of the strength of *Seasons of Misery*; its distinctive approach to the writings and incursions of distraught and disoriented Englishmen reminds us that there is much we still do not grasp about early American settlement.

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