

Homesickness: An American History by Susan Matt. Oxford University Press, 2011. 360 pages. ISBN 978-0195371857, cloth, \$29.95

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Susan Matt's *Homesickness: An American History* is a wide-ranging study, focused on cultural concepts of homesickness throughout American history. Because her subject is an emotion, Matt is able to move across space and time, using homesickness as an organizing trope, a window into whatever setting breeds it. By doing so, she provides a premier example of how to study the history of emotions. Indeed, Matt is the coeditor, with Peter N. Stearns, of the new History of Emotions Series from University of Illinois Press. Though the book speaks to other historiographies concerning the United States—including immigration, westward migration, and the Civil War—the clear intention is to show how a focus on emotions can illuminate the lives of historical subjects. Matt does so skillfully, citing a wealth of sources and telling fascinating stories that render the past equally familiar and strange.

Homesickness is plotted chronologically and thematically; this organization allows for Matt to highlight the shifting ideas around homesickness and how they reflect and impact their historical situations. The first chapter, 'Emotions in Early America,' packs a plethora of characters and settings into its pages, underscoring the vastly different situations of the people inhabiting North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Matt discusses the disparate lives—and, thus, differing conceptions of homesickness—of slaves, indentured servants, the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts Bay's Puritans, Enlightenment thinkers, and American revolutionaries. Even within each group, ideas about home and attachment to place were not uniform or unchanging. For instance, 'Some Puritans saw their ability to withstand separation as proof of their piety; others reminded themselves that mortal life and earthly homes were but temporary and that their true home and eternal life were in heaven' (p. 19).

Understandings of homesickness began to undergo broad changes in America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. One reason for this was the 'powerful and liberating' idea of 'cosmopolitan, unfettered, happy individuals, open to the offerings of the world' (p. 28). This mythology became integral to the mythology of America, fueled by westward expansion and frontier stories. Even President Andrew Jackson—in quintessentially Jacksonian style—mused on migration and whites' exceptional propensity for it: "'To better their condition in an unknown land our forefathers left all that was dear in earthly objects. Our children by thousands yearly leave the land of their birth to seek new homes in distant regions'" (p. 41). All this rhetoric, though, could not save early republican Americans from 'painful lessons in individualism,' as thousands of Americans—from slaves separated from families to western missionaries to boys in boarding schools—dreamed of home and longed to return. Because 'the complex reality of movement became obscured' by uncomplicated myths, Americans of the nineteenth century onwards had little structure by which to understand these feelings and thus were 'unprepared for the emotional challenges they would face' (p. 74).

War is a theme that appears repeatedly in *Homesickness*. The different physical, temporal, and cultural settings of America's wars led to various responses to soldiers' homesickness. The

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third chapter, devoted to the Civil War, explores the ways ideas of duty, gender, home, and nationhood contributed to the lived experiences of soldiers and those they left behind. Matt weaves together stories of mothers seeing off their sons, Southerners defending their homes, and prisoners of war despairing in squalid quarters over Christmas. These situations were made all the more serious because of the widely-held opinion among medical professionals, drawn from 'European discourses on homesickness and nostalgia,' that yearning for home was in fact a disease, indeed a potentially fatal one. Soldiers' letters home—sources Matt mines perspicaciously—'indicate that many worried their homesickness might be a sign of weakness, make them unfit for duty, or even kill them' (p. 76). By the First World War, the American Psychological Association, recognizing the problems homesickness could create, 'attempted to screen out men with mental or emotional disabilities, for they believed that even mild problems in civilian life might become serious hindrances in wartime' (p. 178). Thus, homesickness was by then a clear sign of weakness, even unmanliness, and not a disease to which poor souls might succumb. In World War II, conglomerate groups like the United Service Organizations (USO) brought American comforts and goods to soldiers, providing various services including mailing services and American movies. Such acts served not to make soldiers long for U.S. soil but to alleviate their 'boredom' and 'anxiety' and thus assuage their homesickness (p. 204).

The book also contains insightful sections on immigration, the rise of consumer capitalism, changing American notions of success, and the role of the internet in contemporary thought about place and emplacement. The main thrust of the work is summed up concisely in its conclusion: 'Immigrants and native-born alike know what the emotional rules are in American culture, and by observing them they make their homesickness almost invisible' (p. 248). It is this ability to 'look behind' Americans' naturalized cultural assumptions that lends the book its strength. Matt's study deals just as much with the rhetoric of emotion as the emotion itself. In this way, she deftly navigates the emotionality of people which are so highly constructed and influenced by their own contexts, and yet still seem so universal and natural. This is the tension in which emotions history must live. Emotions are often cross-cultural and universal (or almost universal), but the cultural understandings of emotion vary widely. In turn, these notions and the connected rituals influence and even construct the way the emotion itself is experienced.

Homesickness is a welcome and needed addition to the small but budding historiography of emotions in the United States, complementing the work of scholars such as Peter Stearns, Carol Stearns, William Reddy, and John Corrigan. Some readers might be disappointed to find this cultural history less interdisciplinary than some other work on emotion, especially by European scholars. However, though Matt does not endeavor to engage cognitive psychology or philosophical theories of emotion, she makes a clear case at the outset for a why a historical study of emotions—and, by the same token, incorporating emotions into history—can be fruitful: to do so offers 'a record of intention, motivation and feeling. To focus only on external behaviors misses much of what went on in the past...[H]istorians of emotions argue that [emotions] are central to historical narratives, for their shifting meanings reveal much about the social attitudes and outlooks that were prevalent in earlier eras' (p. 9). *Homesickness* makes a persuasive case for this argument, using the emotion as a lens into whatever context in which it surfaces. Any one of the volume's six chapters reasonably could have been expanded into a book, and yet the treatment of each topic never seems rushed or too cursory, as the book maintains surprising depth despite its considerable breadth.