Birthright: The True Story that Inspired Kidnapped by A. Roger Ekirch

The Ultimate Cold Case!

For the first time, the remarkable story that inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's Kidnapped. No saga of personal hardship so captivated the British public in the eighteenth century as the turbulent life of James Annesley, the presumptive heir of five aristocratic titles and scion of the mighty house of Annesley. Kidnapped at twelve years of age by his uncle, "Jemmy" was shipped from Dublin to America in 1728 as an indentured servant. Only after twelve more years did he at last escape, returning to Ireland to bring his blood rival, the Earl of Anglesea, to justice in one of the epic trials of the century. How, in an age without DNA laboratories or fingerprint records, could a prodigal hope to prove his identity, let alone his legitimacy, after such a long absence—all the while defying accusations of being a "pretender," the bastard son of a maidservant, plus repeated attempts on his life? Bursting with an improbable cast of characters, from a brave Dublin butcher and a wily Scot to the king of England, Birthright evokes in vivid detail the volatile world of Georgian Ireland—complete with its violence, debauchery, ancient rituals, and tenacious loyalties. Drawing on exhaustive research in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and America—including an intensive investigation of court transcripts and innumerable, rarely seen legal depositions—A. Roger Ekirch brilliantly resurrects an extraordinary family drama of betrayal and loss, but also resilience, survival, and redemption. 26 illustrations; 3 maps.

My Personal Review:
Ekirch's account of family lineage gone wrong is the ultimate investigation into crimes of another era. He approaches the subject matter with careful objectiveness - and the reader quickly realizes why - as just about everyone is carrying around some serious moral baggage! It's easy to root against Uncle Richard, but harder to fully embrace Jemmy as a hero worthy of our deepest sympathies. Sure enough, the outcome doesn't disappoint. I won't spoil it, but no one (except maybe the lawyers) rides into the sunset unscathed. Indeed, truth is stranger than fiction. This stuff is far more compelling than the glitzy, empty calorie crime dramas of today.

Aside from simply being a first class yarn, perhaps the most compelling reason to read Birthright is to appreciate how a top historian carefully untangles the events of the distant past. Ekirch succeeds in weaving a
compelling mosaic of lives lived and events transpired almost 300 years ago. It's nothing short of amazing. Museums house the artifacts of the times, but a great historian's work is the only true portal into the collective ethos of these bygone societies. From the intricacies of the English legal system, to the weather patterns (he clearly visited all these locations!), to the time it took for a speedy horseman to convey news from Dublin to London (5 days), Ekirch has compiled an incredible piece of research and understanding. Bravo!

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